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Romance

Said The Spider To The Fly

LOIS BARTH

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Said the Spider to the Fly

CHAPTER I

Perhaps I wouldn't have given the letter another thought if it was not for the fact that Phyllis's abrupt departure had left me, admittedly, suddenly quite lonely. Although, I now think I must have long had an unconscious desire to revisit the old Rutledge house. It was certainly something more than a superficial whim—something deep and inexplicable that had lain dormant since my childhood and had finally coursed its way to the surface, spurred on by nothing more than the unexpected arrival of the letter and the ever-present knowledge that my mother had died at Rutledge.

That year had been a particularly quiet one, preoccupied as I was with piecing together my life after a shattering experience with being the "woman scorned"—an experience made no easier by the realization that it was a time-worn cliche. But Paul Rutledge, who had departed suddenly, without a word, for an assignment in Europe, had finally, if reluctantly, been relegated to the realm of memories. Still, the long, uneventful days at the dress shop my sister Phyllis and I owned left too much time for pondering, and I found myself working tirelessly in the flower garden behind the neat green-and-white cottage that Phyllis and I shared in the quiet Wellington countryside.

Those flowers, beds of delicately scented irises, served as a welcomed panacea, and I found I was no longer satisfied to simply grow the ordinary, pale yellow variety. They had to be the best, the biggest, brightest, and most stunning; and I wasn't in the least

surprised when my irises won first prize at the flower show, even though Phyllis had been doubtful, saying I had fussed with them until they were almost too perfect. Yet they remained her favorite flower, and all through that spring her soft gray coat was rarely without a cluster of the showiest, yellowest ones, secured with a plain, gold pin. It was a flower few women could have worn successfully, but Phyllis's tall, haughty good looks, which had helped to make the dress shop so popular, helped her get away with it.

The irises had kept me occupied, but I found, in time, that even they were not enough. So when, soon after Phyllis's silent departure, the letter arrived, I welcomed it eagerly and immediately took it to the chair by the window in the den to read by the late-afternoon light. A strange, inexplicable sensation crept over me as my eyes traveled quickly over the unfamiliar handwriting in pale blue ink on the thick, pale blue parchment envelope neatly addressed to Miss Ellen Chandler, Harland Court, Wellington. I could feel a frown crease my forehead as I turned over the envelope. There was no return address on either side, just a Bridgeton postmark of June 15, 4:00 P.M. Puzzled, I stared at it for a long minute, and my fingers were suddenly clumsy and strangely unsteady as I broke open the seal. I turned the letter over without reading it, and my eyes flew to the signature:

Carolyn Rutledge

Nearly eight years had elapsed since I had seen Carolyn. Her uncle, Adrian Rutledge, owned Rutledge Publishing Company, dealing largely with historical books. He had become a well-known, though often disliked, figure in the world of

literature. Carolyn was fast following in his image, much to Adrian's disappointment, I presumed, since he would have preferred it to be Paul, Carolyn's brother and Adrian's favorite. But Paul had succumbed to his playboy impulses and indulged in frequent and expensive gambling binges; his involvement with the publishing company was casual, only a minor pastime.

I felt a twinge of pain in remembering my brief, somewhat bitter, romance with Paul Rutledge, seeing vividly, still, the tall, dark-haired man with black, restless eyes, and that wide, enticing grin that could deceive almost anyone—and I had been no exception. While his smooth, adroit manner was at times believable, his insincerity often hung like a transparent veil that cut him off from the world of real feelings. *But hadn't I been in love with him?*

No wonder it was Carolyn who was gaining prominence in publishing circles, I thought. I sat back, recalling the thin, dark, serious little girl who rarely smiled, whose black pigtails had stuck straight out on either side of her head; a strange, arrogant child to whom I could never get close. We had both been seventeen when I said my last good-bye to her at Rutledge and joined my sister, Phyllis, in Wellington, where she had since established herself as a couturiere in the quaint old dress shop Aunt Hattie had left her a short time before.

Carolyn had written only a few brief, unrevealing letters, void of the usual girlish ramblings. Her seriousness and reticence were obvious, and I puzzled over it until the letters stopped and we lost contact. Then, occasionally, I would catch her name in the literary section of various newspapers.

Eight years. She would be twenty-five now. I wondered what had possessed her to write after such a lapse of time. Still puzzled, I turned the smooth parchment over again and began to read. The big, flourishing letters of her handwriting stood out clearly even in the late-afternoon light, and I could almost see that thin, firm hand forming those letters in her characteristically slow and methodical manner.

My dear Ellen,
It has been a long time since we've been in touch, although Paul has told me a great deal about you; but I now have a great favor to ask of you. Uncle Adrian has not been well for some time. He's working on a book of his own, a Civil War history, and he needs someone to do the typing and help with the details. Aunt Florence says with your secretarial background from school you'd have no problem. I do hope you'll come, since Uncle was always so fond of you and your mother. The pay will be extremely adequate, of course. Please do consider it. I'll be expecting you.
P.S. I have no flair for this sort of thing.

The letter lay limply in my hand as I stared out the window into the fading sunlight. She had not elaborated. There was no mention of Serena, who would be nearly twenty. A twinge of uneasiness stabbed at me with the possibility that something had happened to Serena. I had always liked the shy little cousin of Carolyn and Paul. She had been a beautiful child, quiet and unofficious, her small, piquant face framed with long, fine, unbelievably pale, yellow

hair. My thoughts dwelled on her for a long minute, and I wondered with strange concern if she was still at Rutledge.

Thinking about Serena swiftly initiated memories of my childhood at Rutledge. I was very young when Mother took Phyllis and me to live at the manor with Adrian and Florence Rutledge. That was just after the sudden death of our father, Julian Chandler. Rebecca Ellis before her marriage, Mother had been a close friend of Florence's, and Mother's family had long known the Rutledge name. Florence, out of concern at my father's death, had brought us to Rutledge and offered Mother the role of governess to Paul and Carolyn, as well as to Phyllis and myself. Mother accepted the role gratefully, it had appeared, and though we were an oddly assorted group living under the same roof, the girlhood bond between Florence and my mother seemed more firmly cemented after we inhabited Rutledge.

Soon, however, Mother, who had always been shy, became unusually withdrawn and uncommunicative. We were young, but even we sensed something was wrong. We learned later she had never recovered from my father's death.

Several months of childhood bliss had passed at Rutledge when the quietly beautiful Rebecca Chandler became ill and Adrian sent the four of us, Carolyn, Paul, Phyllis, and me, to private boarding school. When we returned to Rutledge after that long, empty summer, my mother, we found, had been confined to her room in the east wing of the manor. Within a month she died. Her death left a void, even in the peaceful life at Rutledge.

Our life continued unchanged there for a number

of years. Then came the excitement of the nine-year-old Serena—Serena with that incredible blonde hair. It was different after Serena came. Instant and obvious hostility sprang up between her and Carolyn and developed into a smoldering antagonism. I never knew what instigated that hostility. Perhaps it was Serena's outstanding looks, which would certainly develop into beauty as she grew older, or perhaps it was the lavish attention Adrian showered upon her. It could have been merely that Carolyn considered her an intruder. Whatever the reason, it was there, and Carolyn, in her reticent, petulant manner, was annoyed.

It seemed like such a long time ago that, a small girl in a white starched dress, blonde curls bobbing along my back, I had walked down the endless, dusty corridors of the manor. Now it was being brought back vividly. For a brief moment I wanted desperately to go back and capture some of the tranquility I had left behind. Yet, simultaneously, the thought was pushed rudely aside by the persistent question of why Carolyn wanted me there now, after the lack of communication; my last letter had never been answered. That was as strange as Paul's sudden courtship beginning as a "friendship renewal" and ending in disaster. My vanity had suffered enough bruising as it was, I decided, without being subjected to further unpleasantness. Still, Paul had gone to Europe—he wouldn't be there....

I glanced back at the letter again, and suddenly there wasn't the slightest question or hesitation in my mind. Adrian had been a father to Phyllis and me, and if he needed assistance.... Odd, though, the long period of silence from Rutledge.

Something didn't quite fit, lying on the edge of my mind and pricking at me from the moment I determinedly folded the letter and crammed it in my handbag until my weather-beaten, tan leather suitcase was packed and bulging. A quick note to Phyllis explaining my destination and I was ready to leave.

Persistently I pushed thoughts of Paul back into the far depths of my mind and idly watched the unfolding of miles of silent black macadam bordered on either side by thick pines and fields not yet burned dry by the summer sun. With dusk approaching I watched the road more closely. Soon I switched on the headlights, but they only gleamed palely in that odd hour between daylight and dusk that struggles to hold back the darkness.

It was a long drive to Bridgeton, and with a loud sigh I gratefully welcomed the outskirts of the town. Halfway through the town the main road divided, and I turned onto the highway heading north. Numerous times, years before, I had traveled that road with Florence and Adrian, and I recognized the narrow wooden bridge at the end of the paved driveway leading from the main road to the house the moment I approached it.

Impulsively I stopped the car for a moment; the house was there, abruptly in front of me, sitting on a slight knoll, visible from the road. I sat in awe, staring at the towering bulk that showed little dabs of scattered light partially hidden by the thick, neatly trimmed hedges running the full length of the house. Tall, Victorian spires reaching upward through the dusk were sharply silhouetted against the gray sky like black daggers. I sat there strangely hypnotized by

this monstrosity of Victorian architecture accented with a hint of Moorish influence. It was too dark to see the house clearly, but suddenly the years rushed back at me and I remembered the first time I had seen it and how then, too, I had sat in awe and stared.

Trembling inside, I shook myself from the past and started the car up the short, steep driveway. It happened so quickly there wasn't a moment to think: One minute I sat behind the wheel, absorbing all of the manor that the dusk revealed, and the next I was catching a silent cry in my throat as something white and wraithlike darted from the trees at the edge of the driveway and flung itself in front of the car.

I twisted the steering wheel, braking automatically, and the tires squealed as my body fell forward; then I heard the sound of the horn ringing sharply in my ears. I sat slumped against the wheel, my heart pounding, peering through the windshield, but there was nothing except the dusk and the looming bulk of the house in front of me. Shakily I rubbed my hand across my forehead; it was hot and damp. Then I pushed myself back and the horn stopped, but I realized the motor was still running. I turned it off and sat there shaking. Whoever had appeared in front of the car was gone.

For a long minute I didn't move, trying to erase the frightening memory of that white, vanishing figure. Then I half stumbled out of the seat and leaned against the car, straining my eyes into the grayness. If I had hit someone! The thought made me shiver. It had been so close! A shadowy figure had definitely moved swiftly in the headlights, dangerously near, seeming to fling itself directly into the path of the car.

Now there was nothing.

Still trembling, I rubbed my arm against my forehead, trying to steady myself. I heard someone behind me and swung around nervously, both hands flat against the car. I had been so preoccupied with trying to ferret out the figure in the darkness that I hadn't noticed the man behind me until I turned. I must have looked white and shaken, because he suddenly took my arms in a firm grip.

"Hey, are you all right?"

I nodded.

He was looking closely at me, and his eyes were dark and probing in the waning light. "Take it easy a minute," he said.

Still too shaken to speak, I stared at him, and my heart skipped a beat. He resembled Paul as he stood there with his shirt sleeves rolled up, his head bent forward, only he was stockily built and blond while Paul was dark and slender.

His eyes were still probing. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

He gave me a quizzical look, and his voice was noticeably brusque. I continued to stare at him and felt his hands warm on my arms.

"I saw something—someone—out there." I pointed shakily toward the trees clumped next to the driveway, their dark forms faintly outlined in the headlights. "Someone jumped in front of the car, someone in white. I almost hit him." I was surprised to find my voice unsteady.

His hands were still on my arms.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded.

His face, half covered with shadows, looked white

in the dusk. I shivered nervously, remembering my sudden jolt of fear at the sight of that white, moving figure picked out by the bright headlights and strangely floating in front of the car, then disappearing into the darkness.

The man's face was blurred and darkly masked in the shadows, and his eyes looked concerned as he scrutinized me closely.

"It was Serena." He spoke as if to himself, and he was thoughtful for a moment when he saw the surprised question on my face.

CHAPTER II

"Serena?" I searched his face. "Then she's still here."

"You know her?" It was his turn for surprise.

"I used to live here. We grew up together, at least for a short while. She was only twelve when I left." My mind was galloping: Serena in a long white dress or cape? What had she been doing out here, and why had she jumped in front of the car?

"Then you must be Ellen," the man was saying.

"Yes, Ellen Chandler," I said, still surprised.

"Paul told me about you." He gave me a searching look, then moved away and leaned against the car, slowly lighting a cigarette. "Are you all right now?" I nodded again. He was staring ahead thoughtfully, and I watched the smoke spiral from the end of the cigarette.

"What... is something wrong with her?" I ventured in that brief moment of silence.

He looked at me quickly and hesitated, as if reluctant to say anything. "She had an accident a long time ago. She's been—different ever since. I've given orders that she's to be watched constantly, but she sometimes slips away. Like tonight." He sighed. "She's undoubtedly back in the house by now."

I wanted to press him further, but something in the tone of his voice hinted that he wasn't going to offer any additional information. Poor Serena, I thought. She had been such a lovely child.

"Why did you come here?" he asked bluntly, stamping out his cigarette, but immediately his face softened as if he realized his abruptness. He smiled a

little sheepishly. Then, serious again, he said, before I could answer, "Paul asked you to come, didn't he?"

"Paul?" I looked askance at him. "No, it . . . it was Carolyn," I stammered, privately admitting to myself for the first time that it was Paul I wanted to see again. "Uncle Adrian has some manuscripts he needs help with," I said quickly.

"I see," he said, and his blond brows drew together in a frown. Then he smiled again slightly and opened the car door. "Okay, get in. I'll put your car in the garage."

The dusk seemed inordinately chilly, pressing tightly around me, and I shivered. I got in wordlessly, and he climbed in beside me and drove the car the short remaining distance to the garage.

I glanced at the firm, clear-cut profile beside me and thought abstractedly, Perhaps I have been foolish to come here, to get involved.

"Where is your luggage?" His voice broke into my thoughts. He had parked the car in the garage, next to a small, maroon sports car, and was opening the door.

"In the trunk. I have only one suitcase."

He nodded and lifted the suitcase out. I found I was strangely aware of him beside me as he guided me along the path with one hand firm on my arm; I thought how much like, and yet unlike, Paul he was. "Watch your step. It's dark here."

The big hulk of the house loomed up before us as we climbed the stairs to the wide, dark porch. He opened the door into an expansive, brightly lighted foyer. I felt the thick carpet under my feet the moment I stepped in. I looked up, squinting a moment in the brightness, and had a quick glimpse of a pale young girl of about twenty with flowing blonde hair,

incredibly light and reaching almost to her waist, cowering behind a half-opened door to the right of the hallway.

Serena!

Abruptly my attention was diverted as I heard the sound of a door, off to one side, opening and closing loudly. I turned. Paul Rutledge stood just inside the door to the left of me, one hand still on the doorknob, staring at me as if he disbelieved what he saw.

"Ellen," he said, with obvious surprise, "it's so good to see you." I watched the slow flush of embarrassment creep over his thin, dark face. My pulse quickened.

For a long moment I stood there staring back at the familiar yet enigmatic expression on the face of the man in front of me. *Paul, how could you have just walked out?* I cried silently to myself. Automatically my chin lifted a little higher as I waited for him to say something further; he watched me standing there tense and waiting. I could feel a burning flush creeping into my own cheeks.

He walked slowly toward me, his feet noiseless on the carpet. My eyes were transfixed on that unchanging expression. A forced smile tugged at my lips, and I gave a quick intake of breath.

"Hello, Paul," I said and realized with faint relief that our meeting wasn't as difficult as I might have imagined. Perhaps that element of surprise was in part responsible, since there had been no time to ponder my reaction; Paul was suddenly, simply there in front of me, lifting my hand in his own and holding it tightly, the queer expression still on his face, the smile still on mine. I felt a quiver of remembrance at the touch of his hand.

"Well, Carolyn told me you were coming, but I didn't expect you quite so soon," he said a little breathlessly. "I see you've met my cousin Mitch."

I was conscious again of the man behind me. Mitch Rutledge. Of course, that explained the similarity in their appearance, and I remembered vaguely Paul once mentioning a cousin somewhere, although I had never seen him at Rutledge. I turned and looked at him for a moment. He had been watching Paul, frowning, as he leaned against a caned chair by the wall. He glanced at me quickly and straightened.

"I'll find Florence. She'll want to get you settled upstairs."

I smiled at him, murmured a thank-you, and he turned abruptly and disappeared through the door where Serena had already vanished. I was forced to look at Paul, thinking to myself how ironic it was that we were back to handshakes.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced the smile to stay on my lips. "I thought you were in Europe," I said evenly.

"I was, but I finished my business there more quickly than I expected and took the first flight back I could get. I just got in this morning. Excellent timing, wouldn't you say?" His eyes twinkled. "I'm glad you're here."

As Paul's dark eyes swept over me approvingly, I could feel the change in his manner. He had been embarrassed when he first saw me, but now his hand lingered over mine a second too long, and those black eyes were a little too intense as he looked down at me. I pulled my hand away from his. His manner became suddenly serious, and he wasn't smiling any more.

Suddenly his arm went around my shoulders, and

he kissed my cheek before I could move away. "I'm really awfully glad to see you, Ellen," he repeated. "Look, I'd like to talk to you later," he said in a low voice, and his eyes penetrated mine.

"I . . . I really don't think there's anything to talk about," I said a little too quickly, but my voice shook and I was forced to drop my eyes.

It was Florence Rutledge who broke the trancelike moment. She came toward us from the hallway, a small, dainty woman dressed simply in gray wool with a touch of white at the throat. She was older now, but she wore her years well, and I felt a sudden rush of homesickness as soon as I saw her. I welcomed the momentary diversion as she stopped in front of me and stood there, quiet and demure, her pretty, round face softly framed with black hair lightly streaked with gray and pulled gently back into a neat bun. She extended a white, slender hand toward me, and I took it and returned her smile. Impulsively she hugged me to her, then, still smiling, stood back and surveyed me closely.

"Ellen, how good of you to come. Mitch told me you were here. Was your trip all right?"

I nodded.

"It's been such a long time. You certainly have grown up, and you're prettier than you used to be."

I smiled inwardly at this. I considered myself only average looking now, but at fifteen I had been awkward, spindly, with huge eyes in a too-thin face.

"Adrian will be glad to see you," Florence rushed on. "And Carolyn, of course. She didn't know just when you'd be coming, and she didn't specify any particular time in her letter, she said. She's in town now but should be back any time." She sighed. "It's

been hectic around here. Adrian and I just got back from a convention and vacation and Paul's been in Europe." She gave him a little smile, smoothed a stray hair into the neat bun, and took my arm. "Come on, let's go into the living room and relax. I just can't believe you're here. It's such a shame we lost touch." She glanced again at Paul, and he frowned and followed us into the living room.

Paul touched my arm. "Would you like a drink before we eat?"

I told him I would settle for a martini.

Florence said, "Carolyn fixed sandwiches before she left. It's lovely out tonight; we can eat on the terrace."

I smiled, said it would be nice, and my eyes swept across the room. It had been completely refurnished since I had last seen it—all pale beige walls, dark green rug, and brightly flowered couch and chairs, contrasting with the long, brick fireplace against the back wall. I stood there, absorbing it all; then I saw a girl sitting on the couch. Leaning forward to pick up a glass from the coffee table, she gave me a queer half smile. She was about my age, perhaps a few years older, slender, with long, brown hair that accented a small, oval face. Her short, pink dress displayed shapely, tanned legs and dainty feet in matching pink sandals. Her legs were crossed, and she idly swung one foot.

"Hello," she said in a low, throaty voice. "I'm Gabrielle, Paul's fiancee." Her voice was emphatic and precise and left no doubts. My heart jumped. Paul engaged! Gabrielle must have known about Paul's and my relationship, and she couldn't have been more explicit. I felt a strange twitching in my stomach. So

she was the reason for Paul's sudden dismissal of me. The twitching turned to anger. Why hadn't Paul told me about her? Why had he let me think. . . ? I glanced swiftly at him, but he had his back to us and was busy fixing drinks at the sideboard.

"I'm Ellen Chandler," I told her in a forced, calm voice and extended my hand, which she didn't take.

"Paul has mentioned you, but I didn't know you were coming here." She, too, glanced at Paul, but he kept his back turned, and I thought it was taking him an extremely long time to mix the drinks.

He did turn then, a glass in each hand, put one in mine, smiled, and said brightly, "Here you go." His brows lifted. "Aunt Florence?"

Florence shook her head at the glass he extended, and he kept it himself, walked over to the fireplace, and leaned against the mantel. He took a long drink and looked at me.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Ellen? Still at the dress shop?"

I nodded. "Business has been good; it keeps us busy." I tried to keep my voice normal, tried to forget that hard lump in the pit of my stomach. "Of course, with Phyllis gone it's almost too much for one person to handle. I thought twice about coming; I only hope Phyllis returns soon."

Florence had found one of the flowered, overstuffed chairs, and she sat back, frowning, her hands relaxed on the arms of the chair. "Phyllis gone?"

I sat on the couch next to Gabrielle and held the glass tightly in both hands, resting them in my lap. "It was quite sudden. She simply told me she had to leave for a while but would be back as soon as possible. It was so unlike her; you remember how she was always

so explicit about everything. This time there was nothing, and she left hurriedly. There wasn't time to question her, and I doubt if she would have said anything if I did. She didn't seem like herself at all that day. She seemed so—preoccupied, nervous."

"How long ago was that?" Paul asked casually, leaning slightly forward.

I caught his dark gaze. "About a month ago. I left word where she could find me. I'm afraid I've been too busy to worry about it."

"You've heard nothing from her?" Florence looked puzzled.

"No, but Phyllis has left before for one reason or another, sometimes on business trips connected with the dress shop, and she rarely, if ever, got in touch with me during the time she was away." I sighed. "It really isn't so strange, except she appeared almost upset when she left. That just wasn't like her."

Still, it *was* strange, but I hadn't really given much thought to it until now.

Gabrielle finished her drink and lighted a cigarette with a slender, gold lighter that seemed to click shut loudly in a moment of silence.

"I imagine you won't be staying long, then, with the dress shop unattended," she said, looking through me and unsmiling.

I disliked her from that moment.

I straightened up on the couch, put my glass on the coffee table, and smoothed my rumpled tweed skirt. "I'm hoping Phyllis does return before I've finished here. Manuscript typing can be quite a lengthy process."

Again, silence, until Florence insisted on knowing all that had transpired since I had last been at

Rutledge. The shop took up much of my time, I told her, along with occasional odd typing jobs I had done and, of course, the iris garden in which I had taken so much pride. When I asked her, then, about Uncle Adrian, she said, "He's been working much too hard on that book of his. You're going to be a big help to him, Ellen. Carolyn is absolutely useless when it comes to secretarial work, but she's marvelous on the editorial end of it."

"I've seen her name in the paper," I told her.

Florence nodded. "She practically runs the whole business. I don't know what we'd do without her." She glanced at Paul, who sighed and frowned.

"Okay, so I still have no interest in it like my dear sister has. Ellen knows that." He flushed and took another drink from his glass. I glanced at him quickly. There were many things I knew about Paul Rutledge.

Florence was silent again, and I busied myself with my own glass. Gabrielle sat wordlessly beside me. Serena was not mentioned, and remembering Mitch Rutledge's reluctance to tell me about Serena, I refrained from bringing her name into the conversation, although I couldn't erase the images of that figure appearing in front of the car and of Serena cowering behind the door.

"Ellen, there's so much to catch up on, we'll have to talk again later," Florence was saying, "but you must be tired." She glanced at her watch. "Anyway, we really ought to eat now, it's getting late. We won't wait for Carolyn; she must have been detained again by that erratic schedule of hers." Sighing quietly, she rose. "I'm afraid Adrian won't be joining us either; he left instructions I'm to take a tray into the den. He'll probably work half the night." She

turned to Paul. "Is Mitch having dinner with us tonight?"

"I doubt it. He said something about working with a client in town." Paul looked at me. "He's a lawyer, has an office in Bridgeton but does a lot of his work here, too. That way he can keep an eye on . . . things." He smiled ruefully. I had the strongest impression he had been about to say "keep an eye on us," but I dismissed it.

"Gabby, will you take Ellen upstairs? She might want to freshen up. She's to have the guest room across the hall from you." Florence straightened and turned to the girl on the couch.

"Of course," Gabrielle answered disinterestedly and gave me a cold, fathomless look.

"I'll see about the sandwiches. Remember, we'll eat on the terrace." Florence touched my arm. "It's really good to have you back, Ellen."

I smiled at her and followed the reluctant Gabrielle, thinking, This is the girl Paul is engaged to. I felt a little, renewed stab of pain and wished, then, for a moment, that I had never come back. I shook myself inwardly and forced myself to listen to Gabby as she matter-of-factly mentioned the occupant of each bedroom as we passed it. My room, at the end of the hall right next to the balcony, was lovely, decorated in shades of lavender and white. Someone had brought up my suitcase and left it inside the door, and the pink-and-white bathroom had been supplied with fresh linen.

I turned around to thank Gabby, but she had disappeared without a word. She was definitely not pleased to see me here, and it was, I thought wryly, because of Paul. Again I saw his face, that compelling

gaze. Much of the hurt had vanished in a year's time
way from him, but now seeing him again had made
t rush back unbidden. Was I still in love with him? I
orced myself not to think about him, not now,
letermined that nothing would interfere with the
work I had decided to undertake.

Quickly changing into a blue pantsuit, I arranged
tubborn strands of dark blonde hair into a tidy knot
it the nape of my neck and applied fresh lipstick. I
mmediately felt better, but as I switched off the light
couldn't shake the feeling of unsteadiness that had
gripped me since my encounter with Paul, and the
uggestion of his demanding hand on mine.

CHAPTER III

They were on the terrace—Paul smoking and staring out at the black outline of trees; Gabby leaning against the railing, her back toward Paul, frowning when she saw me; and Serena, small and withdrawn in a big wooden chair at the end of a narrow, rectangular table set with food, her face turned to one side, the breeze softly touching her long hair.

She didn't see me standing there.

It was then, with her head turned away, that I noticed the faded red, jagged scar that ran from her hairline to her chin. It was only faintly visible now with the tumble of blonde hair half covering her face, but I found myself staring at her and wondering what had happened.

In that brief glimpse I had had of her in the foyer she had looked pale and frightened.

Would she remember me?

I had started toward her, when I heard someone talking loudly from behind a closed door to the left of where I stood.

Florence's voice. "But Mitch, I have tried, you know...."

The urgency of her voice drew me back inside.

"Listen. We've got to make sure. Ellen almost hit her with the car tonight; she had no business being out there." Mitch's voice, hard, determined. "As long as she's here she's got to be watched."

They must have moved away then, because their voices grew muffled and I couldn't hear any more.

My heart jumped unexpectedly. They were

talking about Serena in strange, apprehensive tones. What actually had happened to her?

The door swung open and closed, and Mitch came toward me. He looked surprised to see me; then he frowned, and I wondered if he suspected I had overheard the conversation.

But he smiled warmly as he came up to me.

"Are you feeling better? You were pretty shaken up tonight. I'm sorry about what happened."

He stood squarely in front of me, looking solid and reassuring in the dark tan jacket, his eyes sharply blue and penetrating and his blond hair streaked with light from the hall. I felt myself flush under his gaze.

He must have noticed the question on my face.

"Look," he said quickly, "Serena's all right. She was frightened, of course, as you were, but I've asked Florence to keep a closer watch over her."

"Maybe if I talked to her, maybe . . . "

"No." Mitch quickly put a restraining hand on my arm. "I wish you wouldn't. She's upset so easily."

He spoke quietly, but his voice was authoritative. I looked at him and saw a frown darken his face.

"Please tell me what happened to her. I knew Serena. Maybe I could help." The words tumbled out heedlessly almost before I realized it.

Still frowning, Mitch reluctantly dropped his hand and sighed.

"Not now. I've got to run." He glanced at his watch. "I've got a client waiting in town. Tell Florence not to hold dinner for me, will you? I'll be late."

He left silently, and I stood there feeling a slow, rising anger at him for not confiding in me.

Florence had come out with the sandwiches, and she looked up as I moved toward her.

"Ellen, you remember Serena?"

I turned to the slim, young girl. "Of course," I said and had my first close look at her since my arrival. The white, draping affair had been replaced with an attractive yellow dress that complemented her slenderness. She had been twelve when I last saw her, and that child with the delicate features had been transformed into a lovely young woman, but there was no mistaking the small, pointed face, those large, pale eyes, and that transparent skin, marred only by the red scar.

I smiled at her, but the quickly averted eyes left me with a sudden chill. I tried, unsuccessfully, to shake it off.

"Mitch said not to hold dinner, he's going to be late," I told Florence as brightly as my voice would manage.

Paul smiled ruefully as he leaned back against the terrace railing.

"So, you've been talking with Mitch. I hope he didn't give you a hard time. You look flushed and a little angry."

I looked at him for a long minute, studied those black, probing eyes, and tried to rationalize the sudden strange feeling I had about him. Then I dropped my eyes.

"We only talked a minute," I said levelly.

He started to say something, but Gabby interrupted.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Paul, let's get on with dinner. I have things to do tonight." She gave him a long, stabbing glance, then settled back in her chair, crossed her legs, and swung one pink-sandaled foot

slowly back and forth. She didn't look at me. I sat at the table next to Serena. The girl lifted her head slowly until her eyes were level with mine.

"Serena," I said quietly, "you do remember me, don't you? It's Ellen." She seemed to be staring at me as she sat there stiffly, her hands clenched in her lap, the long, yellow hair falling loosely around her face and draping over her shoulders. Slowly I placed my hand over the small, clenched one, and those vacant eyes suddenly widened and the faint color drained from her face. She pulled her hand out from under mine, gave a long, anguished cry, and fell forward against the table, her hair tumbling out in a wide circle.

Florence rose quickly, went to the prone girl, and gently pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Serena, I'll take you to your room." She turned to me, and her face looked white and strained and suddenly older. "I'm sorry, Ellen. I should have warned you about Serena. I suppose the shock of seeing you after all this time . . . She's been troubled. . . ."

"I know. Mitch told me." I was shaking inside, wondering what had upset the girl. Something I said? Mitch had told me not to talk to her, question her. But I hadn't actually said *anything.*

Paul leaned forward as Florence, supporting Serena, led her from the terrace. "Don't let it bother you. She's hysterical a good deal of the time. Florence will take care of her." He touched my hand.

I nodded and tried to squelch the queasiness in my stomach. "Paul, what happened to her?"

He must have sensed the desperation in my voice, because he leaned back again and frowned. "It was a long time ago." He looked over my head, and I turned and followed his gaze. Florence was standing

in the doorway. She, too, was frowning, and her face still looked strained.

"It was an accident," Florence broke in. "It happened after you had left. A terrible accident. She got locked in what used to be the playroom, you know, the little room at the back of the west wing." She sighed, and her eyes developed a faraway look for a moment. "It was just before her sixteenth birthday. We had turned the playroom into a storage room, and Serena went in there and tried to pry open the old black trunk we always kept locked. The door closed on her and we never knew what happened, but suddenly the room was filled with smoke and she couldn't get out. The door must have locked. We heard her scream. Mitch was the first one to get to her; he broke the door down and got her out, but she was severely burned. You've seen the scar on her face."

I nodded, listening to her but only half hearing, seeing the young, sensitive Serena trapped in that room, standing helplessly while the smoke intensified and the flames crept closer around her. Serena had always been a deeply emotional child; the experience must have left her with a trauma, and that terrible scar couldn't help but remind her of the horror she had been through. No wonder the girl was half out of her mind, I thought.

"... Anyway, she doesn't remember it," Florence was saying as she sat at the table and sighed heavily. "Perhaps it's just as well." She smoothed back a stray hair. "At times she appears completely normal and then again ... Well, you saw her tonight."

Something puzzled me. "What did she want in the trunk?" I remembered that old trunk, black and dusty, pushed into one corner of the playroom.

"I don't know; there was nothing in there to interest her, anyway," Florence added hastily. "I asked her, but she either didn't remember or didn't want to talk about it. Mitch spent a good deal of time with her, but he didn't learn anything."

The meal was quiet then, Paul tossing me occasional glances that left me with a disturbing feeling. Gabby, too, had been quiet throughout Florence's story, eating little and smoking furiously. Now she sat back and swung that foot again, back and forth.

Carolyn still didn't return. I rose, but Paul put a hand on my arm and whispered, "Stay here. I want to talk." Gabby had left her chair and was helping Florence carry the dishes back to the kitchen.

"Paul, I really don't think . . ."

"Please. Sit down. I've something to say." He waited until the table was cleared and Gabby and Florence were safely in the kitchen. Then he was on his feet, his arms tight and familiar around me, and I looked up at him. He bent down and kissed me urgently.

"I've missed you, Ellen," he said, not smiling, those black eyes still probing. "I'm sorry for—you know, everything."

I didn't believe him.

"Look, I still love you. Doesn't that mean anything?"

I slowly pulled away. "Is that why you're planning to marry Gabby?" My voice shook.

I stopped, struggling for words, and to my amazement found hot tears stinging my eyes.

"You were planning it, weren't you, all that time?"

"Ellen, I can explain . . ."

"No, I . . ." I could still feel the pressure of his lips.

"It was necessary. I'm in a bind with Adrian. I'm over my head in debt; he won't help. Carolyn's impossible, and I need money. Gabby wants the Rutledge name, and she knows about the debts—and other things—and threatens to expose me if I don't marry her. I have no choice. She was very adamant about it."

For a brief moment I wanted to believe him, and almost did, remembering what had been between us. Then the bitterness returned.

Suddenly my chin quivered. It wasn't going to bother me like this. I wasn't going to let it.

"Ellen, listen. I can break the engagement with Gabby. I'll straighten things out with Adrian and . . . then it won't matter. She won't have a hold on me. Look, when I saw you tonight . . ." He stopped, his black eyes watching me steadily.

It was that smooth manner working again, I told myself, although for the first time he really did seem to genuinely mean it. But I couldn't trust him; I wouldn't. He had left without a word, become so thoroughly entangled with Gabby. . . .

I pushed the chair back from behind me. "Paul, I really must go," I blurted out and hurried from the terrace, still half wanting to stay.

"Ellen, wait. . . ."

My walk turned into a half run, and Paul didn't try to stop me. I flung myself through the door, frantically holding back my sobs, and saw Mitch Rutledge closing the hall door and coming toward me. Before he could say anything, I ran up the stairs, holding tightly to the banister. I knew by his expression he had seen my quivering chin. I reached

my room and shut the door; the room closed in warmly around me. I had been determined not to let Paul upset me, but he had left me confused and unsure and I didn't know what to think about him. I blinked back angry tears.

I felt suddenly tired from the strain of the day, and I was sure Florence wouldn't object if I didn't return downstairs. Mitch had seen me come up here, I thought wryly, and he could tell Florence if she should wonder about my sudden departure.

Wearily I picked up a few of my toilet articles from the suitcases and opened the drawer of the nightstand. It wasn't until I pulled the drawer out the full length that I saw it lying there, startlingly large in the middle of the drawer, a faded, dried, yellow flower with wide, flat petals that crumpled in my fingers when I picked it up; yellow like an iris, and even in its crumpled state, I could tell it had been a large flower—a large iris!

My pulse quickened alarmingly as I held the crumpled pieces in the palm of my hand. No one else in the area had irises like mine; that had been verified at the flower show. Mine were unique around here, and I had refused to part with any of them. Only Phyllis and I would have had access to them. It was strange. This was definitely one of mine. What was it doing here? It looked so much like one Phyllis would have pinned on her lapel; the brown, dried stem of this crumpled one was snipped off evenly, and it had a definite indentation in it as if it had been pressed down by something. A pin? Something to hold it on a coat?

My pulse continued to race. I couldn't help thinking, Had Phyllis been here? Had Rutledge been

the destination of her sudden, mysterious trip? But what would she be doing here, and why hadn't she told me? And if she had come here, why had no one here seemed to know of her visit?

I shook myself. It couldn't be; there had to be some other explanation. Maybe it just looked like an iris; maybe Florence had similar flowers in her garden and one of them had got dropped in this room. But how did it get in the nightstand?

Again I thought—Phyllis! Had she been in this room, taken off the flower, and put it in the nightstand? Yet ordinarily when she removed an iris from her lapel she put the flower in a glass of water overnight to revive it. Of course, it would long since have been removed. It was absurd, I told myself. If she had come here she would have told me; there would have been no reason to keep it secret.

I didn't throw the iris away. I quickly dropped it back into the nightstand and closed the drawer. My hand shook. Weariness must be making my imagination too susceptible, I thought. I shook myself and undressed for bed.

I had expected a night of tossing and unrest, but the harrowing episode of the strangely disturbed Serena Rutledge appearing so suddenly in front of the car, the strain of seeing Paul, and the discovery of the crumpled iris that had raised uneasy questions in my mind had exhausted me beyond any state of wakefulness. I turned out the light and lay back with a strangely shuddering breath. I remember seeing a thin slice of moonlight filtering through the darkened window before my eyes closed against it.

CHAPTER IV

The bright, Saturday sunlight drove me downstairs by eleven o'clock the next morning, after a deep, undisturbed sleep where thoughts of Paul were finally terminated. I had dressed hurriedly in white knit slacks and a blouse, but it was already hot outside and the heat seemed to penetrate through the walls of the old house.

I knew from experience that it would be one of those scorching, hazy days so prevalent in New England summers, and I felt a sudden impatience for a swim in Adrian's cool, clear pool. That pleasure I would have to forgo, I soon realized when I approached the dining room to catch a late breakfast and found Adrian Rutledge sitting at the table behind a stack of papers, with a cup of coffee steaming in front of him.

He heard my steps and looked up, and a smile broke out over his broad face.

"Well, well, little Ellen. Florrie told me you got in yesterday. Sorry I couldn't see you. I was damn busy, right in the middle of an important editorial." He gave me another big, wide grin. "Come here and let me look at you. Florrie was right. You have grown up, and you're very pretty, my dear. You have your mother's features."

I went over to him, returning his smile, and he pulled me down, appraised me closer this time, and kissed me roughly on the cheek. "It's so good to see you again, Uncle Adrian," I said warmly, "and good to be back." I meant it, in spite of Paul's disturbing presence and my uncertainty about him.

"Glad to have you here, Ellen. You and Phyllis were like daughters to me, you know, after your mother died."

A cloud passed over his gray eyes for a moment, as if his thoughts were trailing backward. Adrian had always liked my mother and her quiet, gentle ways, but with Carolyn, his own niece, he had been strangely aloof. Even though she took an interest in the company, Paul had mentioned that his sister and uncle still did not get along.

I could understand Adrian's disappointment with Paul, who had already been initiated into Rutledge Publishing while I was still at the manor; but he had seemed reluctant to acknowledge Carolyn's interest then, although I was certain he was in great need of her talents.

I wondered now if that gap between them had widened.

Adrian was observing me with those level gray eyes.

"Hmm, whatever you want to stick yourself in this place for, I don't know. Just to help out an old man, eh?"

"I'm sure I'll enjoy working on the book," I told him quickly.

Adrian smiled wryly, still watching me. "Fine, but don't let this thing between Paul and Gabby bother you, my dear. It's just another of Paul's expected inconsistencies. It'll change with a little patience, probably reverse itself if you still want it." His eyes scanned my face knowingly.

I knew I flushed; I forced a smile but said nothing, and Adrian cleared his throat. Fat, gruff Uncle Adrian sitting there watching me, his thick hair gray

now, but the bushy eyebrows black over the penetrating gray eyes. Carolyn had said he was ill, but he didn't look it with those sparkling eyes and ruddy face. I wondered just how ill he really was. He busied himself lighting a cigar with slow preciseness. He had seen the flush on my face, my efforts to turn away. He said suddenly, brusquely, "Good of you to come, Ellen. I've got lots for you to do, but not until this afternoon. I always work alone in the morning. Then I'll be in my office in town. You can go over these papers for me later."

He puffed silently on the cigar. "Just how long has it been?"

"About eight years," I told him, and I thought to myself it felt almost as if I hadn't been away at all; but we were all older now and would have to get reacquainted.

"Then it's time we got caught up. Sit down and tell me what's happened."

I sat next to him and briefly told him about the dress shop. No, Phyllis hadn't married; she had been too busy, she always said, with running the shop, and it offered all the security she wanted. She was on a trip, I explained quickly. I didn't divulge the qualms I had begun to feel about her disappearance and the disturbing thought of that crumpled iris that I couldn't put out of my mind.

"Uncle, I'm sorry this is the last of the coffee. I..."

I turned at the sound of another voice, coming through the doorway of the dining room. A tall, thin, big-boned girl about my own age stood there with a tray in her hands. She tossed back thick, short black hair cut to squarely frame a tanned, angular, serious

face that could only belong to Carolyn Rutledge. She had changed a great deal, I thought, since I had been away, filling out somewhat, her features maturing and becoming more pronounced; but the thin, high-cheeked, frowning face was the same as when she had worn pigtails. Her eyes were dark, but her features resembled those of her uncle when he had been thinner, younger.

Something unreadable flickered across her face for a moment before a hesitant smile touched her wide mouth.

"It's Ellen, of course. I'm glad you came," she said quickly, but I had the feeling her recognition was almost reluctant. The thin, dark face lit up suddenly, and the frown disappeared as she looked directly at me. "I got in late last night. I had work to do at the office." She sighed and said in a low voice out of Adrian's earshot, "Uncle has been driving me to my wit's end trying to keep up with him. I guess my letter explained my absolute ineptitude for stenography."

She came forward quickly, set the tray on the table, and took another cup of coffee from it. I thought I saw her hand tremble slightly.

"All right, go tell Florrie to make some more. I'm going to be here a while," Adrian said impatiently, and Carolyn looked at him, frowning.

"Aunt Florence isn't feeling well," she said brusquely. "I'll get it."

Abruptly she turned to me. "You haven't had breakfast yet, have you?"

"No. I'm afraid I got down a little late."

"Come on. Uncle won't need you until later. We'll get something in the kitchen. Gabby just finished. You've met Gabby?"

"Only briefly," I told her, not mentioning the cool, awkward reception.

Carolyn was silent for a moment, then she lighted a cigarette and squinted through the smoke, those brown eyes looking coolly at me.

"I hope you didn't mind coming, Ellen. Paul told me about your—relationship." She paused. "Are you in love with him?"

She had always been frank, even as a child, and as she watched me I felt my face flush. The Carolyn I remembered had been a young girl. This Carolyn was a grown woman and a stranger, and I was reluctant to tell her anything. I hesitated so long she said, "I shouldn't have asked you that. It's really none of my concern. Anyway, it doesn't matter now." She ground out the half-smoked cigarette in a glass ashtray on the kitchen table, and again I noticed the slight tremor of her hand. I felt I had to tell her.

"Carolyn, there's nothing between Paul and me now," I began, trying to convince myself as well.

"He's still in love with you." She spoke in a low voice, half to herself, then lapsed into silence again and slowly poured herself a cup of coffee, deliberately averting her eyes. Then she became suddenly busy, buttering toast and pouring my coffee, and she didn't look as if she expected any sort of an answer from me.

I sat there across from her, sipping the hot liquid slowly and trying to think of something to say. She quietly ate her toast, then lighted another cigarette. I looked at her closely once when she had her eyes downcast toward her coffee cup. She could have been attractive if she had worn a different hair style, used a little makeup in the right places, and disposed of that perpetual frown. But she had been a part of Rutledge

Publishing for so long that, I supposed, she was completely lost in it, absorbed by it, and apparently nothing else mattered to her. I had never heard of her connection with anyone outside of the Rutledge circle, never read of any engagement, and she wore no rings on either hand. Perhaps she was the wise one, I thought ruefully.

She looked up then, tossed me a brief, empty smile, and asked about the dress shop. I told her quickly, then, feeling the faint prick of fear, I asked, "Has Phyllis been here within the past few weeks?"

Her head jerked up as if she had been slapped, then she frowned and quickly put the cigarette to her lips.

"Phyllis? Why no, why would she come here?" Her voice sounded composed and matter-of-fact, but her face had whitened under her light tan.

The discovery of the iris seemed, suddenly, at that moment, too fantastic to mention, and I decided not to say anything about it to her. I slowly let out my breath. "I just thought she might have come here, perhaps for a visit, and hadn't told me about it." Carolyn had been here, I knew, while Florence and Adrian were away.

Carolyn leaned back and sighed.

"I'm afraid we've all been out of touch much too long." She made no further reference to Phyllis, and I dropped the subject. Instead I asked her about Rutledge Publishing, and she filled me in on the missing years quickly and succinctly. "It keeps us all occupied," she concluded.

I was idly thinking about her characteristic reticence when a flash of yellow outside the kitchen door caught my eye. Carolyn saw my glance and she, too, turned around.

"Serena, where are you going?"

Serena, in yellow terrycloth robe, her blonde hair owing to her waist, swung around and looked at us. he fright she had shown the night before had anished, and her face was calm and devoid of xpression. She looked directly at me, and her eyes ddenly clouded as if she wanted to say something. stead, she turned to Carolyn.

"I want to go for a walk." The voice was dull, tulant.

"You can't go unless someone is with you; you ow Uncle Mitch doesn't want you outdoors alone. sides, Aunt Florence wants you to help with the oms." Carolyn spoke sharply, and the girl's already le face whitened. Carolyn turned toward the table, t Serena stood for a moment, her large blue eyes sting on Carolyn's back with an expression of deep ilike, then she turned meekly and disappeared wn the hall.

She had appeared perfectly normal just then, I ought; spoiled, perhaps, and a little independent, t certainly not like the debilitated little thing I had n the night before. And that searching look she had en me. I wondered if she had wanted to talk to me d then thought better of it. Because of Carolyn? It uld be difficult to know with someone like Serena, ose moods could change so suddenly and extraor- narily.

Carolyn's sigh roused me. "Serena has been such a al."

"Florence told me what happened to her. What a rible thing."

"Yes, it must have been. I wasn't here at the time." She answered abruptly, without the slightest hint

of warmth in her voice. Again I sensed the antagonism that had always existed between the two of them, only it appeared more pronounced now that they were both older. I supposed that living in the same house together, Serena so lovely and fragile and Carolyn too tall and thin and angular, could cause a strain on Carolyn's part. That could be why she had lost herself in her work.

The silence was about to become unbearable when she rose and crushed out her cigarette with a vengeance. "Ellen, you don't mind, do you? I've got to see Uncle."

I smiled at her. "Of course not. Anyway, the sun is beautiful. I think I'll sit on the terrace for a while."

"You might as well take advantage of it while it's quiet. Gabby's gone to town, Florence is in bed with a headache, and God only knows where Paul is—probably off gambling somewhere." She started to walk away.

"And Mitch?" I asked interestedly.

"He's working," she said in a flat, toneless voice and left the room. I had the strongest feeling that she hadn't liked my asking about him.

I hadn't expected to find Serena on the terrace, but the girl was sitting on the railing, both arms hugging one of the tall, white supporting columns. She was still wearing the yellow robe. She heard my approach and roused herself and turned around, the red scar on her cheek clearly visible.

"Ellen," she said timidly, and I stopped and stared at her, startled. She did remember, and the confusion and fear of the previous day seemed to have dissipated. I sat beside her and took her hand.

"Serena, don't be frightened," I said. "I want to be

your friend, like we were before. You remember?"

Her eyes seemed to stare vacantly, but she nodded.

"Remember when we were children we used to play here together at the manor? You and Phyllis and Carolyn and me? If there's anything wrong, I want to help you. Why were you frightened of me last night? Because you *were* frightened, weren't you?" She just stared at me. "Did seeing me remind you of something you wanted to forget? Tell me, Serena." I tried to keep the urgency from my voice.

Serena just looked at me, saying nothing. She didn't seem frightened of me now. Silently she pulled something out of the pocket of the terrycloth robe and fondled it in her slim hands. My eyes followed their motion. It was a dried flower that had been carefully pressed for preservation, a large, yellow flower with broad petals.

An iris! Like the one upstairs!

I felt a surge of excitement and bafflement. "Where did you get that, Serena?" I asked quickly.

"The lady gave it to me. She was a nice lady."

"Who? What lady? What did she look like?"

I grasped her arm.

Serena sighed and looked down at her arms. "She's dead. I saw her fall. She had a funny look on her face."

"Who's dead? Serena, tell me. Where did you see her?"

Serena's lovely face suddenly paled and those large, liquid eyes stared perplexedly at me. She frowned.

"Sometimes I can't remember things. Uncle Mitch helps me...." Her voice trailed off and she turned away.

I persisted. "Serena, you've got to tell me," I said with obvious urgency, but she only shook her head numbly and wouldn't turn around. I knew I had pressed her too hard. She didn't want to remember—or couldn't. If I had been more patient, I thought with disappointment, and questioned her slowly, she might have told me what I wanted to know. Mitch would have been gentle with her.

I released her arm and sat there dejectedly for a moment, watching the slim shoulders in front of me slump slightly forward, the golden head turned to one side. Then she suddenly jumped to her feet and ran from the terrace. Would I ever win her confidence? Vaguely I realized I was biting my lower lip in concentration, and the sudden pain roused me from my momentary lethargy.

There was nothing more I could do now.

CHAPTER V

Restlessness overcame me, mixed with persistent, nagging thoughts of Phyllis, and by early afternoon I welcomed Adrian's first draft of the Civil War history. It was extraordinarily well written and painstakingly detailed, and I soon lost myself in it as I sat in the quiet of the dark, paneled study with its heavy, old furniture.

I was glad to be away from the somewhat strained silence that had prevailed over lunch. It had remained almost unbroken until Adrian had finally leaned back with a deep sigh. "Okay, little Ellen, let's get to work.

"I'll be in the den for a while. I've got more editing to do," he had said, depositing me in the study. "When you're finished you can leave the manuscript in the desk drawer, and I'll check it later." He had tossed me keys with which to lock the drawer. "Make sure you do," he had said gruffly, ambling from the room, and I had started in typing with determination.

My engrossment with the manuscript continued through to the last page of large, scrawled handwriting, by which time I was able to decipher even the nearly illegible portions. Methodically I proofread the last page of typing, put the manuscript into the drawer, locked it, and leaned back and closed my eyes. I felt the tension ease from my body, and gradually the visions of Grant and Lee that Adrian had brought so vividly back to life in the manuscript faded, and I was jolted back to the present, to Rutledge manor. And just as gradually the uneasiness

began creeping over me—the increasing concern that Phyllis had been here and that something had happened to her.

I hadn't been able to rid myself of that terrible thought, with still nothing more to go on than my sister's hurried trip to someplace she wouldn't divulge and the fact that I had seen a couple of crumpled irises that I was certain could only have been grown in my own garden. Perhaps it was, I thought, a little hysterical to pin conclusions on such circumstantial evidence, but the uneasiness stayed with me, and by 5 o'clock I had had enough of the solitude of the study. I went back to the front of the house. The rooms felt hot and stuffy although a window in the dining room had been opened and a light breeze gently touched the curtains. I glanced out the window over the wide, green lawn that stretched beyond the driveway to the edge of the pool. The water in the pool was gray now, reflecting the gray, overcast sky, and the air was sultry and smelled of rain.

"Oh, Ellen, there you are."

I turned at the sound of Florence's voice behind me. She walked slowly to the flowered couch against the wall, her beige gown rustling softly behind her. She sat down with a sigh, smoothed back her hair, and wearily pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Sit down, Ellen. I'd like to talk to you." She frowned. "I haven't felt at all well today, one of my headaches." Then she smiled wanly as I sat beside her.

"How did the typing go?"

So it was to be merely pleasant, social conversation, I thought. "Fine," I told her, "no problems.

Uncle Adrian is very good, you know; at least I found the history extremely interesting."

"Yes, he always did have a special knack for writing history." She paused, idly pleating the folds of her gown. "Ellen," she said hesitatingly, "you've been talking to Serena."

I had been wrong; it was not to be social prater. I sat there watching her and sensed the disapproval in her voice. How had she known?

"I couldn't help but overhear you," she said in answer to my unasked question. She saw the puzzled expression on my face. "I'd really prefer you didn't try to get too close to her, not like you were before. There are some things you don't know, and it's better that way." She was abrupt, authoritative.

"Aunt Florence, what...?"

"Don't ask me any more. Please. Just leave it at that. And promise me you won't engage in any more lengthy conversations with her."

"But I..."

"Please, Ellen. It's important."

Mitch, too, hadn't wanted me talking to Serena. I nodded, knowing I couldn't possibly agree to any such thing, not when Serena knew something she couldn't remember or was frightened to speak of, not when that something might involve Phyllis.

Florence leaned forward suddenly and put a hand on my arm. "Ellen, I didn't mean to sound peevish about it, but you do understand. You've been away from here a long time, and things have changed. Serena went through a lot, and we mustn't upset her."

"I understand, of course," I said, forcing a smile, and she seemed satisfied.

"Good. Now let's see what Carolyn and Gabby have devised for dinner. I just didn't feel up to it today." She rose and suddenly turned to me. "Oh, Paul has been asking for you."

Paul. I had almost forgotten my outburst of the night before, and I felt myself begin to flush. It would be my turn now to be embarrassed, I thought as we walked together to the dining room.

Paul surprised me and didn't once refer to the episode—but there wasn't really any opportunity, with Gabby and Carolyn carrying platters of steaming food into the dining room.

"It's much cooler in here," Gabby said with a sigh. "Adrian, I do wish you'd get the pool cleaned so we could use it; it's atrociously hot."

"I know, Gabby. Have a little patience, will you?" Adrian settled into his chair and stubbed out his cigar. "I was away, remember? And Paul and Mitch haven't had time. There are other things to be attended to now. Little Ellen's working on my manuscript, and I have to keep her busy." He paused for a moment. "All right," he added abruptly, as if he had just made up his mind. "I'll see about it tomorrow. The bank there is sagging, too, I think. Have to get that fixed."

"I really think you ought to put a railing around it, Uncle." Carolyn pushed back her short, dark bob, and her thin face tightened. "You know Serena is frightened of the water, and you never know what might happen if she got too close."

I glanced at Serena, but she didn't seem to acknowledge that Carolyn had spoken. Serena sat there quietly, unspeaking, dressed in blue, her hair drawn back with a matching blue ribbon, the scar prominent against her white face. I watched her for several minutes, but she didn't look up, and I

wondered how much of our conversation she had already forgotten. Did she still have that crumpled flower? Had she remembered where it had come from? Regardless of Florence's request, I was going to talk to Serena again.

Gabby rose as soon as the meal was over. "I'm going upstairs to change. It's too darn hot down here." She left with a flourish and a toss of her long, brown hair.

"And I have work to do," Carolyn said, crushing out a freshly lighted cigarette and leaving hastily.

Paul looked at me, and I caught his quick smile as I rose to leave. His darting brown eyes shifted from Gabby's and Carolyn's backs to me. He took my arm.

"Ellen, about last night. I wish you'd change your mind."

"I . . . I don't know, Paul, it . . . it's different now," I stammered.

He continued to look at me, not smiling now, his eyes squinting a little, his face flushed. He shrugged his shoulders. He had already had too much to drink before he came home. I had seen him like this before, suave and attentive, slightly glassy-eyed. When I gently drew my arm away he didn't restrain me. I looked up at him. It still hurt. Would I ever be able to trust him again? Paul frowned but said nothing as I turned away unsteadily.

Gabby was right. It was much too hot downstairs. I went out on the front porch and stood dejectedly breathing in the cool, rain-laden air. I found myself thinking that Mitch hadn't arrived for dinner, and just then I saw his car turn into the driveway and stop. He got out, briefcase in hand. He came quickly toward me, and a frown replaced the smile on his face.

I looked at him wordlessly, saw those blue eyes suddenly searching my face as he ran a hand through his blond hair.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded and thought ruefully that my encounter with Paul only moments before must have shown on my face—the uncertainty, the disappointment.

Mitch didn't question me but said suddenly, "Have you had dinner yet?"

I told him we had, and he sighed. "I didn't know I was going to be so late. I'll get something in the kitchen." He made no move to go but stood there looking down at me, a quizzical expression on his face, and I found my eyes drawn to his. "Were you going somewhere?" he asked.

"No," I said quickly. "I just wanted to get some air." He was still looking at me strangely, and I suddenly realized that Mitch would know whether Phyllis had been here or not, even though Carolyn had seemed so surprised at my question. Maybe Serena had told him something.

"Mitch," I began hesitantly, "was anyone here, before I came, I mean, about a month ago, someone outside of Rutledge?"

I watched the frown form on his face.

"Here? No one but the usual people. Of course, I'm away a good part of the time, but I'm sure Florence or Adrian would have mentioned something about it."

"Aunt Florence said they were away a while ago."

"Oh, she and Adrian flew to California for a publishers' convention. That was about a month ago."

"Then someone could have come here and they wouldn't have known about it."

"Sure, but Carolyn was here. She would have said something. Paul was in Europe and Gabby was away, in her own apartment, I believe."

"I think Serena might have seen someone here."

"Serena? You've been talking to her." His mouth tightened and he frowned again, and his voice sounded hard. "Ellen, as I said before, it's best if you leave her alone."

"I know about the accident. Florence told me."

"What else did she tell you?"

"Nothing."

He was silent for a moment, and one of his sandy eyebrows lifted slightly as he gave me a penetrating stare. Then he set his briefcase on the porch steps and put his hands on my arms, facing me to him. "Now, young lady, what's this all about, your thinking someone was here? Who, and what about it? And what's Serena got to do with it?" He sounded concerned.

I felt foolish and inept standing there in that sullen air, his hands tight on my arms, and listening to a distant roll of approaching thunder. His blue eyes held my gaze. "Maybe it's nothing," I began, trying to shake it off. "But Phyllis, my sister, left Wellington very suddenly nearly a month ago, and I haven't heard from her—which isn't altogether so strange, but she was very upset about something when she left. I could tell. And then upstairs in my room I found a dried-up iris in the nightstand. I grow those flowers in Wellington; they're much larger than the usual ones, deeper hued and—"

"What's a flower got to do with all this?" he asked impatiently.

I rushed on, my words tumbling out now that I had started. "Phyllis always wore one on her coat. This

one was exactly like the ones I grow. She could have been here and," I continued quickly when I saw he was going to interrupt me, "Serena had one, too, exactly the same. She said the 'lady' gave it to her, and that the lady was dead. Oh, Mitch, if it was Phyllis. If she was here. . . ." My heart began beating heavily as I realized the possibility raised by my thoughts.

"Look, you can't be sure; you need a lot more to go on. Those flowers could have come from anyplace. Have you been out in Florence's garden? She raises irises, too; the garden is full of them." His voice was patient now.

"But not like these. They can't be. There are no others around this area like mine." It seemed I had repeated this so many times before. "Mine are a different variety. The one in the room upstairs was like that." I remembered, too, the indentation on the one I had found. Not many women wore irises.

Mitch's hands tightened. "You said it was dried up and it fell to pieces when you picked it up."

"I know it was one of mine," I insisted.

"You still don't know if she was here," he said quietly. "It could be a coincidence."

"No, she must have been here. You must have seen her. Serena must have told you. Why don't you tell me the truth? Why . . . ?"

"Ellen, listen to me." He shook me, and I realized then my voice had begun to rise. I looked at him sheepishly.

"Just take it easy. I didn't see her here. And no one else said anything about it."

"But Serena talks about the 'lady' being here," I continued, quieter now. "The nice lady who gave her the flower."

"You know Serena is not responsible for a good deal of what she says or believes she sees. She conjures up a lot of things in her imagination that she doesn't even remember later, and if your sister was here it doesn't mean anything happened."

"But Serena said she's dead—she saw her fall," I argued unabashed and breathless, and my throat ached.

"Are you sure of this?" he asked skeptically, tossing me another quizzical look. I had to turn away.

I hesitated only a minute and then met his eyes again. "I asked her who was dead, but she wouldn't say any more. Then when I started to insist she tell me, she became frightened and ran."

"You're still making too much out of this. Serena could have imagined the whole thing."

"Not the flowers, not *my* flowers. And why did she run? Why was she frightened?"

"Anyone in her condition is prone to extreme fright when they feel they are being pressured or threatened. It could have been nothing more than that."

I wanted to accept his explanations because I didn't want anything to have happened to Phyllis, but I couldn't believe that I had caused Serena's fright. Her story seemed too real to me to be dismissed so lightly. Mitch hadn't seen the terror in that pale little face or heard the faltering of her voice as I questioned her. If he had, I thought, maybe he wouldn't be so quick to put it aside and consider it just my imagination too hard at work. I stood there wordlessly. He was still watching me.

His voice softened. "Do you still have the flower?"

I nodded, mentally seeing it in the nightstand.

"Okay, I want you to show it to me later. Right now, have some coffee with me. We'd better get inside, it's starting to rain."

He picked up his briefcase and took my arm as the first drops of rain spattered sharply against the stones. We had coffee and we talked. He asked about Phyllis, if she had ever been gone like this before.

I shook my head. "Not without telling me."

He admitted that it was odd but pointed out that there could be a good many explanations for it. I wanted to believe him, hoping it could be explained away as easily as that. He leaned back against the door jamb and lighted a cigarette.

"Would she have any reason to come here?"

"I don't think so," I said after a moment's hesitation. "We had lost touch with Rutledge for some time."

"If she was here, it's possible she left some evidence behind her. Actual physical evidence, something other than a dried flower." He sounded impatient and he spoke quietly, although we were alone in the room. "All right, let's take a look at the flower," he said with a suppressed sigh. "If she was here and if she is connected with that flower, she must have been in the room you're in now. It's logical, anyway."

I had to agree with him; it seemed very probable. "But why would she go up to the room, that particular room, if no one was here when she came?"

Mitch only frowned and shook his head.

Our feet were noiseless on the thickly carpeted stairs as Mitch followed close behind me. Then I opened the door to my room, feeling strangely unstrung, and made straight for the nightstand. My

hand fumbled awkwardly with the knob of the drawer as the drawer stuck, then flew open. I stopped short and my heart began pounding loudly as my hand foolishly traced every inch of that smooth drawer that smelled faintly of cedar.

There was nothing.

CHAPTER VI

Mitch must have seen me stiffen because he was suddenly behind me. "What's wrong?" he asked brusquely.

"It isn't here," I told him woodenly, and he, too, looked in the empty drawer.

I don't know if it was sudden apprehension or simply disappointment that swung me around. "But it was here. I know it. I put it back there myself." I spoke loudly, afraid that he wouldn't believe me. Then I thought suddenly to myself, Why am I telling him all this? He had seemed curious at my arrival but not especially pleased, and now I was suspicious that he thought I was either making up a story or becoming concerned over nothing.

Mitch stood there quietly listening to my outburst, then he sighed, "Someone must have cleaned, maybe Gabby or even Serena."

"Since last night?"

"There's been plenty of time, probably while you were working."

He was undoubtedly right. I had been in the study a long time.

"I wonder how long it was in there," I said thoughtfully, "and why it wasn't thrown out before."

"Probably overlooked," Mitch said, shrugging.

"Serena might still have hers," I said excitedly. "She—"

"Wait." Mitch put a restraining hand on my arm. "Let's look around. Maybe we can find some concrete evidence that Phyllis was here," he said

indulgently. "If not, you're going to forget about this."

His voice was stern, and I felt a shiver pass through me. Was he threatening me? I suddenly wished I hadn't divulged anything to him.

We searched the room and the adjoining bathroom. He told me to look for anything that might have belonged to Phyllis. "You're the only one who can identify that," he explained.

There was, of course, nothing. Disappointment and sheepishness must have shown on my face, because when I turned around after a futile search of the bathroom Mitch was standing stockily in the doorway, obviously displeased, frowning at me.

"So there was nothing." He took my arm in a hard grip as I walked past him.

"Now, stop this. You don't know she was here. If she was, she could have been in any of the rooms. You can't prove anything."

His voice was gruff, and I stared up at him in surprise, watching those blue eyes penetrate through me. I tried to pull away.

"Maybe Serena . . ."

"Listen to me." He kept his tight grip on my arm, hen his voice softened, although his face was still tern. "Keep out of this. Don't get involved. You lon't know these people, not anymore. Just leave it lone."

Was he still threatening me or was there the hint of warning in his voice now?

He stood close to me, solid and stern and frowning, nd his blue eyes searched my face. I didn't answer im. I just looked up at him for a long moment and a trange feeling of warmth passed over me. He was

standing so close and there was something in his face. . . . I thought, with a pounding heart, that he was going to kiss me in another minute, but he suddenly drew back, and I dropped my eyes, pulling my arm free from his grip, and quickly left the room.

I knew Mitch was following me silently, but I didn't wait for him. The rooms downstairs were suffocating, and I wished I had changed into something cooler. Perhaps there would be a breeze on the terrace, I thought. There wasn't. It had stopped raining, barely dampening the ground, and it was still hot but not as stifling as it was in the house.

Gabby had changed into bright yellow shorts and halter, and she sat on the terrace railing, where I had found Serena before, slowly swinging one white-sandaled foot back and forth in monotonous rhythm and watching the card game in progress at the table. Adrian was talking loudly and puffing heavily on a fresh cigar, and he tilted his chair back and swung around to look at me. A broad grin broke out over his ruddy face.

"Ellen, my dear, won't you join us?"

Florence and Carolyn, sitting on opposite ends of the table, looked up as Adrian spoke and Florence said, smiling, "Please do, Ellen. It's too hot to do much else." She sighed and smoothed her beige gown and pushed a stray gray-black hair into place. Her small, round face looked tired, but she smiled at me. Carolyn, frowning, her head bent over the cards, said nothing.

"Maybe she'd rather go for a walk," Gabby broke in, rising before I could answer.

"I think a walk would be fine," I said, feeling strangely relieved, wanting to get away from them

and not knowing why. Paul wasn't there; perhaps it was just because of Carolyn's sudden dark moodiness that I actually welcomed the thought of a walk even with Gabby.

She appeared quite lighthearted and talkative as we slowly made our way along the steps that sloped down the bank from the terrace. The steps were short and steep, and we guided ourselves carefully with one hand on the wrought-iron railing. She chattered inanely for a short distance along the path, then stopped abruptly and turned to me. Her wide, gray eyes were appraising me coolly. She pouted.

"Carolyn told me about you and Paul," she said in a voice pitched a trifle too high. She was blunt, direct, observing me with that cool gaze, her head raised and tilted to one side.

Of course. Carolyn had told me she knew, that Paul had told her.

"But he's marrying me," Gabby continued in that excited voice, "and I intend to hold on to him. I can, you know. There are certain things that . . . well, he just wouldn't dare push me aside."

So Paul had told me the truth, I thought. *And if that's why you came here, don't think there's anything you can do about us,* she was warning with a look of superiority. *Don't think you're going to push your way into Rutledge.*

"Gabby, there's nothing between Paul and me. Not anymore," I explained quietly, fighting down the rising anger.

"I suppose he never mentioned me, that we were to be engaged and married?"

No, I agreed silently, he had said nothing.

Gabby was watching me with a tight little smile on

her lips. A slight breeze stirred and ruffled her brown hair, and she tossed her head back.

"That would be like Paul, not to mention it," she said cynically. "I suppose I should have expected as much." She became silent, looking away from me; then she sighed. "Poor Paul, I guess he's stuck with me." But I saw the smug smile on her lips as she turned abruptly and started back toward the terrace.

Stuck with her. I knew the hold she had over him, but was that all there was to it? Again she stopped, turned halfway, and looked at me. I hadn't moved.

"I really didn't want to go for a walk. I had to talk to you. I had to let you know how things stand between Paul and me," she said slowly in a low voice, then ran up the remaining steps.

I should have sensed what she wanted, I told myself, that it wasn't going to be a friendly talk but that it would involve Paul. But what I had said was true. There was nothing between us any longer, and I had meant it when I told Gabby.

Slowly I retraced my steps, following Gabby's retreating figure, and when I reached the terrace she had already disappeared into the house. I felt suddenly tired and excused myself from another invitation to join in the card game.

Carolyn said, "Of course, Ellen," and Florence smiled. Adrian was silently absorbed in the cards.

I went to my room, closed the door, and prepared for bed. Although it was still rather early, a sudden weariness had overtaken me, and I knew sleep was the only way to shut out the disturbing thoughts that raced through me.

The tap on the door was so soft and hesitant that I

thought at first I had imagined it; but it came again, louder this time, and I sat up sleepily and listened. It was warm in the room, and I remembered then that I had forgotten to open the window. There was silence for a moment, then another tap. This time I heard it distinctly and turned on the ivory-shaded lamp on the nightstand. The room sprang into soft light, and I blinked in the brightness. There was silence from the hallway, and by the time I stumbled to the door I thought perhaps whoever had been out there had left. I could sense the surprise on my face when I opened the door and found Serena standing there in a long, pink nightgown, that lovely hair a pale wreath around her face. She was obviously upset as she stared at me wordlessly, and I was concerned at her paleness.

"Serena," I began, putting my hand lightly on her arm. "What is it?"

She looked at me for a long moment, that white face expressionless, then she touched my hand and I felt her fingers cold against my skin.

"Ellen," she ventured timidly in a soft, trembling voice, "can I talk to you?"

"Of course. We can talk in my room."

She pulled back. "No. Too many people. They listen." She glanced around fearfully. Then her hand tightened on mine.

"The carriage room." She pulled her hand away with a jerk, turned swiftly, and her long hair swung over her face. She ran hurriedly to the end of the corridor and disappeared down the stairs. I knew where she was going, to the old room on the ground floor under the kitchen that I remembered was used for storage now but had been the protection for the

carriages when the manor was first constructed.

I stood there, feeling strangely reluctant to follow her. But maybe she knew something about Phyllis, maybe she was going to tell me what happened to the "lady" who had given her the iris. I found myself at the landing and walked quietly down the carpeted stairs and across the dining room and into the kitchen. It was quiet. No one had awakened. Then my hand was on the knob of the door in front of me, turning it slowly with quiet trepidation.

The door swung easily backward at my touch, the hinges squeaking a little, and a waft of familiar, stale air from a room long unused struck my face. I took a faltering step forward and guided myself along with one hand brushing against the dusty wall.

"Serena," I called in a loud whisper. No answer. There was not a sound anywhere, so I started down the stairway. The air was saturated with damp chilliness, and I clutched the folds of my nightgown tighter around me.

Where was Serena? I didn't like the dark, abandoned atmosphere and was tempted to turn back, but automatically one more step took me lower on the stairs and I kept on, one step at a time, cautiously keeping my hand off the web-covered railing.

Serena was nowhere in sight.

Stillness surrounded me. The air was heavy with it. Then without any telltale sound or the slightest air current caused by a sudden movement, I felt the pressure on my back, the quick hard push that jolted my feet from the steps. My feet moved quickly, sliding along the edges of the stairs, trying to catch their balance, and my hands flailed helplessly along

the smooth wall. The force of the push had jolted my body around, and my shoulder struck the railing with a sharp blow. I heard the loud crack of the wood as I pitched forward into blackness.

The surprised and terrified cry in my throat was lost instantly in the closeness of those narrow walls. I remember excruciating pain as my head struck the rough-hewn floorboards at the foot of the stairs, then the stifling, musty darkness. There was something else, too—the faint click as the door closed again.

I didn't quite lose consciousness. I knew I was sprawled awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs. I realized my fall must have been broken when my shoulder struck the railing, before the force of that push had thrown me into a helpless heap. My head ached and my body was twisted painfully as I pulled myself up slowly in the darkness and lay half slumped against the railing.

For a long time I stayed like that, and my mind kept drifting to Serena. Where was she? Had she decided not to meet me after all? But my mind refused to concentrate beyond that point, and I felt suddenly weak and confused.

My shoulder throbbed with a sharp pain where it had struck the railing, but I managed somehow to grasp the top of the railing and pull myself to my feet. Swaying dizzily, I stumbled once on the rickety stairs, quickly caught myself again by the railing, and clung to it, my heart pounding loudly. My hand drew back spasmodically then as it slid onto some sticky, matted cobwebs; I brushed my hand quickly against the nightgown. Gingerly I touched the railing again, trying to avoid the patches of webs as much as was possible in the darkness, and slowly groped my way

until I reached the top of the stairs. I caught my breath in short, quick gasps, and I leaned against the post for support.

For what seemed an interminable time I stayed like that, my head whirling dizzily with the unbelievable thought that was coursing through it.

Someone had pushed me down those stairs with vicious, calculating intent!

Serena? Had she suddenly become violent? Had she got me to come here for that purpose? I had no answer and I didn't want to think about it, but it was there, along with the vivid remembrance of those strong hands with their deadly mission and the railing that had snapped so quickly under pressure. Serena seemed so frail, but maybe her appearance was deceiving—and if she had become violent...

I shivered again as the cold dampness of the carriage room penetrated my body, and I realized vaguely but with a start that I wore only a flimsy nightgown, barely adequate in the chill of the room. I took a deep breath and forced myself from the support of the railing and took the last step to the landing. If only it wasn't so dark, I remember thinking.

Something stopped me suddenly, some unplaceable sound, quiet and surreptitious, and again one hand reached out to touch the railing. I withdrew it almost at once and stumbled breathlessly, still shivering, into the little alcove next to the door that led into the back hall.

Someone was out there! I could hear muffled footsteps beyond the door, coming closer, then the faint yet distinct click-click of the turning of the knob. My hand touched my throat. Was whoever it had been coming back?

I hardly dared to breathe and stood there ransfixed as the door slowly opened with the slight queak. A dark, shadowy figure emerged as if trying ot to be seen and stepped onto the landing.

A thin shaft of light from the half-opened door ruck Mitch Rutledge's strong, clear profile and ndy hair and the firm set of his shoulders in the tan ather jacket. He was fully dressed in spite of the late our, I observed, and sudden surprise dispelled the ar for a moment. It was jolted back almost nmediately by a frightening thought.

Could it have been Mitch who had crept up behind e, followed me to the stairs, and then pushed?

My head swam. I must have cried out then, because swung around immediately, obviously startled, id I knew he saw me crouched and shivering there in e alcove.

CHAPTER VII

He came quickly toward me, frowning in surprise, and his eyes traveled from my disarrayed hair falling in long, thick strands around my face, to the thin, white nightgown I hadn't bothered to throw a robe over.

"Ellen, what are you doing here?" He sounded genuinely surprised. His face was stern and white in the dimness, but his voice was concerned as he stood there watching me.

I shook my head numbly. I couldn't answer him. I couldn't think. A peculiar lethargy had gripped me and rendered me limp and incapable of feeling or response of any sort. My head throbbed, and I rubbed it to ease the pain. I felt suddenly sick as my head spun giddily. The pressure of those hands placed just above the small of my back, with those hard fingers digging into me, had not been imagination. I shivered again.

Suddenly the walls began wavering and dipping and seemed to close in smotheringly. My heart leaped. Could it have been Mitch? Had he been lurking there behind the door, waiting?

"Ellen?" he said softly. "Are you all right?"

When I didn't answer he started toward me again, and I pressed myself tighter into the curve of the alcove. He put his hands firmly on my arms, and I could see his blue eyes searching my face.

"Look, you're going to catch cold out here." I must have looked white and shaken because he suddenly frowned again, still watching me closely. His hands moved up my arms.

"Come into the study. I'll fix you a drink."

"No," I sobbed loudly and tried to turn, but I couldn't move. My mind raced. Had Phyllis, too, been lured out into the darkness by someone in this house?

Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly!...

The walls pitched and wavered. He was in front of me, standing close. I stiffened, breathing fast, then slowly lost my hold on the roughness of the alcove wall and slumped sideways. Mitch caught me as I fell.

I felt warm and safe in the thick blankets, and automatically snuggled down deeper, oblivious to the sounds I heard from somewhere below that seemed to creep through the old house and become louder by the time they reached my room. The room was in semi-darkness, cool and quiet. My head still ached, and I didn't want to move. I knew Mitch was still there, that he drew the blankets up closer around my shoulders, his hand brushing against my bare skin. He stood watching me for a long minute, then moved away. Was he still in the room somewhere? Wondering what to do next? There would be so many ways he could... Yet, if he had really wanted to kill me he had had the perfect opportunity. But he hadn't done anything. Maybe he was going to wait, to find out just how much I knew....

I must have dozed then, though I don't remember actually falling asleep; but I roused once and had a rather blurred view of someone standing by the edge of the bed, someone short with a neat gray mustache and gray hair falling away from a receding hairline. A round, pink face beamed down at me and thick,

round glasses twinkled through a rising mist. I closed my eyes quickly and opened them again. The face was still there, only clearer now, and the beaming expression was fast turning to a frown.

"Well, young lady, how do you feel? I'm Dr. Brent," he continued when I lay there and stared silently up at him. "You've got a few nasty bruises and you've been shaken up quite a bit, but other than that you're okay. Nothing broken. What happened to you, anyway?" he asked.

Then Mitch was there again, standing by the doctor, watching me. "Did you fall, Ellen?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head emphatically, and realizing suddenly that I had been holding my breath, I let it out now slowly as I looked from Mitch to the doctor and back to Mitch again. "Someone was behind me. Someone pushed me," I said, finding my voice with an effort. I saw the doctor glance quickly at Mitch, but Mitch said nothing; he only looked at me strangely.

"Pushed, Miss Chandler? Are you sure?" Dr. Brent's black brows lifted in twin peaks, and he frowned.

"Yes, I..."

"I understand that stairway is dark and used very seldom. Some sort of storeroom?" He glanced inquiringly at Mitch, who nodded. "If you weren't familiar with it, as is probably the case, since Mitch tells me you came here after a long absence, you could have easily slipped and fallen."

"I didn't. Someone pushed me. I felt hands on my back."

"You're not saying someone was trying to kill

you!" the doctor said incredulously. I looked up at him and thought that now that it was stated like that, now that it was out in the open, the idea did seem a little ridiculous. Yet the feel of those hands...

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know." I turned then, suddenly conscious of a strange uneasiness. He was right. Why would anyone have pushed me down those stairs? Again I was sure someone had, although Mitch obviously didn't believe me, nor did Dr. Brent. My thoughts whirled. Had it been Mitch, or Serena?

Dr. Brent smiled at me over his glasses. "You'll be all right. I'm going to leave you a sleeping pill in case you need it, and I recommend you stay quiet the rest of the day. You should feel better by tomorrow." He patted my hand, left the sleeping pill with Mitch, then picked up his bag and left.

Mitch stood by the bed, scowling at me, his hands in his pockets. He was still fully dressed, as I had seen him while I cowered in the alcove, and he watched me quietly, his eyes suddenly dark and penetrating.

"What were you doing in the carriage room?" he asked in short, sharp tones, but I could sense the concern in his voice. "You could have been seriously hurt in that fall."

"I..." Abruptly I stopped. Should I mention Serena? I didn't want to cause her any trouble; yet if it had been Serena who had pushed me, it would be foolish to try to protect her.

Mitch's leading question prompted my answer. "Were you following someone?"

"Serena," I told him quietly, looking down at the blue coverlet on the bed. "She wanted to talk to me. She seemed frightened about something, didn't want

anyone to hear. So she thought of the carriage room." I paused and looked up at Mitch, but his expression hadn't changed and he hadn't moved.

"Go on," he urged brusquely.

"She came to my room, asked me to meet her in the carriage room. Then she left, and by the time I got downstairs she was gone. I assumed she had gone to the carriage room so I opened the door and started down the stairs. I called to her but she didn't answer, and it was so quiet I wondered if she was down there. Then I felt the hands on my back, right after I started down."

My words rushed out unprompted.

"Are you sure about that?" Mitch moved then, running a hand through his blond hair, still frowning.

"Of course," I said in sudden flaring anger. "Someone must have been waiting at the top of the stairs, maybe in the alcove, and followed me down."

"Serena?" he asked promptly.

"I don't know. I didn't see her anyplace, but it was someone." *Maybe even you,* I thought and felt my heart leap. Maybe it had been Mitch all the time, and he was trying to divert my suspicions. I hadn't seen Serena there, but I had seen Mitch come through the door and turn when he spotted me in the alcove.

My heart was still pounding strangely, and I quickly averted my gaze, pulling the coverlet closer around me. For the first time I was conscious of the throbbing in my shoulder and right leg. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

"You're tired," Mitch said, softly now. I opened my eyes for a moment and saw the frown disappear from his face. He half smiled. "Stay in bed as long as you like." He glanced at his watch. "It's only four

o'clock. I'll tell Adrian you're not up to working today."

"That isn't necessary," I told him with an assurance I didn't feel. "I'll be all right. I can work this afternoon if he needs me."

Mitch frowned at me, then sighed and suddenly cupped my chin in his hand. He looked at me for a long moment, then said, "All right, but watch your step. I don't want anything else to happen to you." Before I could muster a smile or a word, he turned abruptly and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Again a queer little quiver of excitement passed through me, and I thought for a minute, Could it have been Mitch on the stairs? I found myself not wanting to believe it. Yet maybe he was only pretending concern.

I didn't need the sleeping pill. My thoughts were swirling wildly, but suddenly my eyes refused to stay open, and I felt myself drifting far down into sleep, until even my bruised shoulder was forgotten. Strangely enough, I slept peacefully and awakened only when bright, sharp sunlight streamed through the lavender print curtains. A light knock and the door slowly opening brought me quickly to a sitting position. Florence closed the door and came hurriedly toward me, the folds of her flowered housecoat swishing quietly around her feet.

"How are you feeling, Ellen?" She sat on the edge of the bed, and her round face, framed neatly with the soft swirl of graying hair, looked pale and worried. "Mitch told us what happened and he called Dr. Brent, but he wouldn't let any of us see you last night. I was so worried. You could have been killed," she

said with horror, and again I recalled those hands on my back, the sudden sharp pain of my shoulder against the railing, my head striking the floor. A little shiver passed through me at the portent of her words.

"I'm really all right now, Aunt Florence." I smiled faintly. "Only a sore shoulder." I touched it tenderly and suppressed a wince.

She asked the inevitable, as I knew she would.

"What were you doing in the carriage room?"

I propped up my pillow and leaned back. I didn't want to tell her too much about Serena. I had to see Serena first.

Florence was watching me.

"It was late. I found Serena wandering around, and I didn't think she should be left alone, so I followed her," I lied glibly. "Suddenly she disappeared, and I thought she might have gone to the carriage room. I called, but she didn't answer. Then I must have tripped."

Maybe it would be safer, I thought, if I let them think it was an accident, although I had told Mitch the truth. I wondered now if I should have said nothing.

Florence was talking, a frown creasing her white forehead. "Serena," she said half to herself. "She hasn't been in the carriage room for years. Are you sure she went there?"

"No," I told her reluctantly, but truthfully this time. "I thought she went there, but she didn't answer when I called," I repeated patiently.

"Well, I'm going to talk to her anyway," Florence declared, rising and smoothing the housecoat. "By the way, Adrian said to tell you to take the day off. It's Sunday anyway. There's no need to exert yourself."

I felt a secret relief. Somehow I didn't feel up to :yping a manuscript, or even thinking about history, n spite of what I had told Mitch. The previous night :till weighed too heavily on my mind.

Florence started away from the bed. "I hope I lidn't wake you," she said apologetically, "but it's ılmost noon, and I thought I ought to look in at east."

"I'm glad you did, Aunt Florence. I want to get up nyway."

"All right, if you think you should. Mitch said he hought you should stay in bed today."

"No, I'm fine now. Maybe even a walk would help o get rid of some of this stiffness."

"You'll find fresh coffee in the kitchen, and there's oast. We'll have lunch soon."

I smiled at her and told her it would be fine. She ;ave me a long, rather searching look before she left.

It was no cooler, but darkening clouds scudded cross the sky, and I knew the bright sunshine would ot last long. I dressed carefully in yellow slacks and :rsey, favoring my sore shoulder, which was darkly :ained black and blue and slightly swollen, and I vinced when I lifted my arm. My head, too, was :nder in one spot, and I brushed my hair gingerly, ıen twisted it into a knot. Other than those few ruises, I thought, I was all right.

Carolyn had already started lunch by the time I got ownstairs. I entered the kitchen, and Paul rushed ɔward me, his dark eyes darting over my face. He :emed concerned when he took my hands tightly in is, and I didn't pull away.

"Ellen, thank heavens you're all right. We were all ɔ worried." A frown flickered across his thin, dark ıce. "Mitch said you weren't hurt badly, but it could

have been serious. What were you doing up at that hour of the night?"

"I couldn't sleep," I told him, glancing up and then quickly away, hoping he wouldn't see the lie on my face.

If he did, he said nothing, just stood there looking at me, then smiling faintly.

"I think you'd better leave the exploring for the daytime. No more of these nocturnal expeditions."

I forced a smile and told him I didn't plan on any more, voluntary or otherwise.

Mitch, sitting next to Carolyn and slowly smoking a cigarette, was watching me closely, a frown on his otherwise expressionless face. His eyes, darkly blue and penetrating, were observing me with interest, wondering, perhaps, why I hadn't told Paul of my belief that I had been pushed. As I moved to the table and poured a cup of coffee, Mitch said, rising from his chair, "Sit here, Ellen, I've got to go over some briefs before lunch." He touched my arm. "How's the shoulder?"

I looked up at those observing, blue eyes. "It's sore," I admitted, and then I remembered. "I'm afraid I broke the railing when I fell against it."

"Forget it. It can be fixed." He smiled at me. "Sure you're okay?"

I nodded.

"Don't let Adrian work you too hard for a couple of days."

"He's right. Uncle can be very trying at times." Carolyn sighed deeply, and her thin, angular face looked tired and pale. She turned and watched Mitch leave the room, then she looked at me. "Mitch was concerned about you," she said, sounding displeased.

"We all were," Paul added, coming to the table. "Especially when Doc Brent showed up here in the middle of the night. What did you expect to find, anyway?" His eyebrows rose over the dark eyes.

"I don't know. I was just exploring." The words rushed out heedlessly.

"There's nothing in the carriage room," Carolyn said impatiently. She ground out her half-smoked cigarette in the glass ashtray and nervously fingered the ashtray between her hands. "You remember it, Ellen, when we were small. Nothing has changed. It's still just a storage room like it's always been." Her voice was hard, reprimanding. "I just can't understand why you'd want to go down there. There's nothing."

"I can't explain it." I shrugged. "I couldn't sleep, it was hot, and I thought if I walked around a while . . ." My voice drifted off, and I forced myself to look at her. Disbelief showed clearly in those brown eyes, and she continued to finger the ashtray.

Paul said suddenly, "Serena was up last night, too."

Paul had seen Serena. Perhaps Serena had seen him too and had run from him. Paul or Carolyn. Somehow I didn't think Serena would have run from Mitch. He was the only one, I was certain, she trusted. I would try to talk to Serena after lunch.

CHAPTER VIII

Carolyn was still looking at me in an oddly probing manner, as if she were thinking deeply about something. At that moment, before I could question her, Gabby's voice drifted into the kitchen, and she walked slowly toward us, her arm linked in Florence's. Florence was promising that Adrian would have the pool cleaned before the week was out.

"I hope the weather holds up," Gabby said with a sigh and a toss of her long, brown hair. She threw me a cursory glance as she sat down at the table. "You certainly gave us a scare. You really ought to be more careful. This is a very dangerous house." She smiled at me insinuatingly, but I said nothing, just watched her sitting there tapping one long, red fingernail on the table and swinging her foot in that habitual manner. Florence informed me that Adrian was taking lunch in the study again.

"Sunday or not, he usually works all day. He said for you to rest, though; he won't have anything ready until tomorrow afternoon. He's sorry about what happened. The railing was probably loose."

I told Florence I would be more than ready to work by tomorrow, and lunch proceeded. Conversation was strained—Carolyn was exceptionally quiet and Paul kept looking up with an occasional half smile in my direction. Serena sat, a small, silent figure, at the far end of the table, next to Mitch. She kept her eyes downcast throughout the meal, barely touching her food, and she rose quickly when it was over. I caught up with her as she reached the stairs.

"Serena, wait."

She stopped, and I saw her hand stiffen over the newel post as she turned slowly, her yellow hair long and shimmering around her face. I went up to her.

"What happened last night? I went to the carriage room but I didn't see you. Were you there? I called to you."

Serena said, hesitantly, in a voice barely above a whisper, "I ran. I was afraid. Someone was coming." Her face paled.

The someone had seen me head for the carriage room and followed me! Someone who didn't want me talking to Serena . . .

Florence? Or Mitch? They had both expressed disapproval. It was there again, that queer little lump of apprehension that settled in my throat and refused to budge. Someone had heard us talking. Someone had followed . . .

My head was spinning. "Serena, please tell me about the lady who gave you the flower. Do you remember now what she looked like?"

Serena watched my face, and her pale blue eyes brightened, but she said nothing.

"Where did you see her?" I tried hard to keep the tone of my voice normal. Serena continued to stare at me, her face white, then she said slowly, "She fell from the balcony."

"You saw her?" I prompted urgently.

Serena nodded. "She's dead. She had a funny look on her face." Serena had told me before.

"Who was it?" I almost shouted as the girl stood there unspeaking, and her eyes clouded over a frown. I knew she wouldn't tell me any more. She had a secret, and I was invading her privacy. She quickly

jerked her hand out from under mine and walked slowly upstairs.

Disappointment kept me quietly standing, watching Serena's fast-retreating back. I didn't know any more now than when I first talked with her. *She's dead. She had a funny look on her face.* The words pounded in my head, and I still felt those cold fingers of apprehension closing around me when I thought of Phyllis.

It wouldn't do any good to stand there and think about it; I had to find something to do. Adrian had relieved me of typing, temporarily, and I wished now that I had insisted I was fine and wouldn't at all mind working. But it was too late. Adrian was in the study, undoubtedly poring over his laboriously handwritten first draft, which he would later pass on to me in installments. Since he hadn't had lunch with us, I felt he must be deeply involved in the manuscript and I couldn't bring myself to disturb him.

Instead, I decided on the walk I had mentioned earlier to Florence. Leaving the coolness of the hall, I stepped into the sticky heat still prevailing in the afternoon, although the sun had disappeared and the sky was a blanket of gray overcast. It is going to rain, I thought inanely as I crossed the driveway and the short lawn at the rear of the manor and walked slowly toward the bordering woods.

Halfway there I stopped and looked up at the manor towering above me. It was my first clear view of it since my arrival, and it had always intrigued me with that unusual mixture of Victorian and Moorish architecture. Somehow it seemed larger and more imposing than I had remembered, sitting sturdily on its knoll and jutting its tall spires up into the sky. The

three-story structure was solidly built, its clapboards stained and weatherbeaten, with a middle section protruding beyond the portions on either side and all supporting tall, oblong windows. A white railing, with paint peeling from the sun, encircled the long, wide terrace on the first floor. Above was the balcony with its own white railing, from which someone—Phyllis?—had fallen. The carriage-room doors loomed as unseeing eyes in the dark, little-used ground floor.

A dark shadow clouded a window by the balcony, then vanished. Someone had been standing there. . . . I shivered, turned again to the woods, and found the footpath. It was long and narrow and wound its way through the pines interspersed with thick growths of vines that caught at my sneakers. Suddenly I heard a loud snapping of twigs behind me. Startled, I swung around and saw Serena standing there, small and pale, her face partially hidden by the thick mane of hair. She wore the long, white dress I had seen her in the night I arrived, when she had appeared like a white shadow in front of the car.

"Serena, what are you doing here?" I shouted in surprise.

"The lady's dead," she repeated dully. My heart began pounding.

"Do you know where she is?" I took her small, white hand in my own as excitement pushed my words out shrilly. Serena looked at me steadily, then slowly nodded, and her face seemed to turn even whiter.

"You've got to tell me," I insisted, grasping her hand tightly, afraid, suddenly, that I might be pushing her too hard again and she would flee at any moment.

Surprisingly she didn't but released her hand and started to walk along the path in front of me.

Numbly I followed her, my heart still beating loudly. "Serena, why didn't you tell me?"

She didn't answer but kept walking slowly. Had Serena known all along? Why had she been afraid?

Both sides of the path were choked with vines and thick, hard stubble, but patches of pine needles and leaves blended smoothly in the middle as if they had been raked over recently. Mutely I followed Serena's white-clad figure, the long dress fluttering around the heels of her sandals. The path terminated on the edge of a long, shallow ravine half filled with rocks and covered with briars and tall grass. I hurried to catch up with her and glanced quickly at her face as she stood there seemingly hypnotized; then my eyes slowly followed her gaze to the edge of the ravine.

"Serena, what is it?" My voice rasped in a loud whisper. As I moved forward to get a better look, my foot caught under a crisscrossed section of vines that hung over the ravine. I stumbled and fell toward the edge of the ravine. Serena didn't stir.

Stunned, I stayed like that for a minute, then I moved to push myself to my feet. My hand struck something hard and unyielding in the tall grass. Puzzled, I followed the direction of my hand, and I felt my eyes widen in surprise as my fingers automatically closed around the hard object at which I was staring. It was a brown sandal, covering a slim, stockinged foot. Several tall spikes of thick grass had twisted around the heel of the sandal.

My eyes were riveted on that strangely lifeless foot; then my hand jerked back, and I sat there, half crouched in the grass, every nerve taut. I forced my

eyes up the length of the still figure lying facedown. The head was covered with a dirty, matted scarf. A thick strand of reddish-blonde hair stuck out from under it.

Phyllis! The half sob tore from my throat as the ground tipped upside down. No, it couldn't be, it . . . ! Something had happened to her. She was so terribly still. . . . My breath caught in my throat. I stayed there, crouched, shivering in spite of the heat, not comprehending what I saw. I closed my eyes as the grass whirled dizzily, then reluctantly opened them again. I shivered again. There was no sound in that pregnant silence except the occasional faint chirping of a bird somewhere in the distance and the droning of cicadas in the hot grass. The heat was oppressive under the darkening sky, and the odor that I had noticed before was now causing my stomach to turn.

She didn't look right; she must have been there for some time. I kneeled on the hard stubble, my head bent, trying to clear the whirling ground in front of me. Serena hadn't moved. She was standing in the same spot and still staring down at Phyllis's body.

The cicadas had stopped abruptly, with no warning, and the air was still and sultry. Thunder began rumbling in the distance. I was strangely and poignantly aware of my surroundings as I closed my eyes and opened them again. Phyllis was still lying there. My heart pounded. I knew she was dead. Somehow I managed to pull myself to my feet and force my stiff legs backward. I had to get to the house. I had to tell someone. But I didn't want to leave Phyllis.

Serena! She could go. I grabbed her arm and shook her. "Serena, go back to the house. Get help." Serena

looked at me blankly, and the scar gleamed red against her pale face.

"Please, Serena."

She shook her head and turned away, her slim shoulders hunched forward. A sob caught in my throat. I had to get Mitch, someone! Breathlessly I turned and started to run. It was hot, suffocatingly hot, and I began to gasp for breath after only a short distance. The low rumbling of the thunder grew closer and I thought, almost hysterically, If it rains, Phyllis lying in the rain . . . But it wouldn't make any difference.

My breath quickened; I tried to run faster, stumbled on the hard stubble, but quickly righted myself and ran on. It wasn't far to the house; it hadn't taken long to follow the path through the woods to the edge of the ravine where I had found Phyllis, and I hadn't been hurrying then. Yet the path seemed endless now, and the damp ground under my feet was a hindrance as I struggled to keep my balance.

Persistently I pushed my way through sharp, overhanging branches that caught at my clothes and my hair. My feet were sinking into the soft moss as I ran frantically, my breath hot in my throat. Then the dark outlines of the manor miraculously loomed up in front of me, and I was sobbing as I half stumbled across the wide lawn, the sound of thunder coming closer with each roll. Relief washed over me when I saw Mitch's car in the driveway. Then I was flinging the door open and leaning against it as the coolness of the hall rushed at me.

I caught my breath. My throat ached. Florence's hazy figure appeared suddenly, and she stood there looking startled.

"Ellen, what is it?"

"Get Mitch," I choked; my voice was drowned out by a loud clap of thunder, and the hall seemed suddenly dark and gloomy.

Florence came toward me, a frown on her usually placid face. I must have looked queer, because she was watching me strangely, and she touched my arm with a noticeably quavering hand.

"Ellen, you're shivering. What's wrong?"

"Phyllis is out there. Get Dr. Brent. Get Mitch, someone . . ."

I couldn't go on because Florence suddenly swam in front of me in a mass of color, and I pressed harder against the door, fighting dizziness. My face burned hotly and was wet with perspiration, but cold shivers coursed through me. I rubbed a hand across my forehead. Florence was gone. I waited, unable to move, trying to block out the vivid picture of Phyllis lying in the ravine.

Quick footsteps were coming toward me from the darkened corridor past the library. Urgent hands were on my arms. I opened my eyes. Mitch was frowning down at me.

"Ellen, what's this all about? You're so pale. What happened to you?" He spoke gently.

I forgot my suspicions of him. I forgot everything except Phyllis.

"Mitch, she . . . Phyllis—out there. In the woods."

"Phyllis? What happened?" His voice hardened.

"I don't know. She's out there—by the ravine. She's dead. I left Serena there; she wouldn't come."

"What was Serena doing there?"

"She saw me. She led me there."

Mitch gave me a strange, unfathomable look. He

was thoughtful for a minute, frowning down at me, then his face became grim.

"All right. Stay here. I'll call Doc Brent and meet him out there. Tell me exactly where you found her."

"In the ravine. By the path. I'll show you."

"No, you stay here."

"Mitch, I—I can't." My voice was drowned out as thunder closed in noisily around the windows. He sighed.

"All right. We'd better take the car and go by the back road; it's quicker. Looks like rain." He drew me to a chair by the stairway. "Wait here a minute."

He left, and I sat huddled in the chair, still shivering. He couldn't have been gone long. Still, it seemed that I waited endlessly for Mitch to return, watching the first drops of rain pelting against the semicircular, filigree window in the hall.

Footsteps again, and Mitch was lifting me from the chair, gently.

"Doc Brent is on his way," he said, replying to the question poised on my lips. "Let's get out there. It's starting to rain."

He put an arm lightly around me, and we left the dimness of the hall, passing Florence's silent figure, and stepped into the rain. It felt cool on my face and I savored it for a minute, then Mitch was hurrying me along toward the driveway. I kept thinking about Phyllis lying there in the grass with the rain beating down.... I shook myself inwardly in a sort of half daze, then Mitch was putting me in the car and I sat there with impatient expectation.

"Do you know why she might have come here?" he asked quietly almost as soon as he was seated

beside me. I shook my head, then said no quickly when I realized Mitch wasn't looking at me but was frowning through the rain-spattered windshield as he started the car.

"I knew she was here. I knew something happened to her," I said shakily in a voice too high pitched. "I knew when I saw the iris, and Serena said—"

"Look, she might only be hurt. We don't know how long she's been out there."

"No, I know she's dead," I insisted. "Serena was sure the lady was dead. She saw her fall. It must have been Phyllis." My voice faded as I again realized the probability. How long had she been lying there, I wondered, in that partially obscured ravine, and how had she gotten there?

CHAPTER IX

Mitch silently lighted a cigarette and offered me one, but I shook my head.

"Take it easy," he said, giving me a disconcerting look, and he leaned over and squeezed my hand. Then he quickly swung the car onto the back road behind the manor, close to the woods. It was only a short drive to the ravine. Mitch guided the car along the narrow dirt road, parked at the side, and helped me out. Light rain again struck our faces.

"Okay, let's have a look." He hastily ground out his half-smoked cigarette and guided me along the rough path to the ravine.

"Serena's gone," I said in an alarmed whisper.

Mitch said nothing but kept his hand on my arm. I found my footsteps quickening as we approached the ravine.

"It's over here," I told him shakily as a few more steps brought us the remaining short distance to the edge of the ravine. Then Mitch held me back.

"Wait here, Ellen," he said. He went ahead of me and bent down in almost the exact spot where I had tripped and fallen, and again I visualized the thin chiffon scarf wet and clinging from the rain. Spasmodically I moved forward.

"Stay back," Mitch said sharply and frowned up at me as he saw me approaching. "There's nothing you can do."

Somehow the realization had stayed in the depths of my mind, refusing to be recognized. Now it struck fully, with the spur of Mitch's cold, sharp words. I stood there shivering, barely aware of the rain that

was falling steadily. I heard the ambulance arrive, sirens silenced, and numbly watched Dr. Brent's short, round figure coming toward us at a fast pace. He paused, seemingly out of breath, glanced at me through thick glasses, but said nothing; then he, too, was bending over the slim woman in the ravine. He talked with Mitch in low tones for what seemed an endless time before they both rose slowly. Dr. Brent sighed.

"She's been dead for some time."

He was talking with Mitch again. I stayed where I was, unmoving, feeling numbness slowly enveloping me. Mitch was beside me, pulling me back from that oblivion.

"Come on, Ellen," he said quietly.

"No," I choked huskily and pressed my hands against my eyes, as he suddenly put his arms around me and held me comfortingly close against him.

"I'm sorry you had to see her like this," he said gently. He held me until the shivering stopped, then he sighed and turned, keeping one arm tight around my waist. I averted my eyes from the long, white stretcher being carried toward the ravine. "Let's get out of this rain. Doc Brent will take care of things here." I clung to him, stumbling once as the ground wavered, and Mitch tightened his grip. "Only a little farther," he said, then he was putting me into the car and getting in beside me.

Immediately his arm went around me. "Take it easy, Ellen, and try to relax. Try not think about it."

But I couldn't. I kept seeing Phyllis lying there.

Trembling, I leaned back in the seat and felt my breath rising in my throat.

"When Serena told me, I should have looked for Phyllis. . . . I should have—"

"Listen, Ellen. You had no way of knowing the truth. You can only believe half of what Serena said. And you heard Doc Brent," Mitch said sternly. "Your sister was already dead. It wouldn't have made any difference."

"But I should have made her tell me," I insisted wearily. "I should have . . ."

Wordlessly Mitch drew me close to him, and I sobbed out my grief with my head against his chest. He held me like that for a long time, and I realized at length that the rain had increased and the windshield of the car was covered with little droplets spattering in the silence.

Mitch looked down at me tenderly and gently pushed my tousled hair back from my hot face.

"Do you want to talk about it now?"

I nodded against him, then reluctantly drew back and leaned against the cushions. Talk about it. There were so many unanswered questions, and I felt so limp and lifeless sitting there, my thoughts pushing backward to Phyllis in the brown sandals and that fluttering, rain-soaked scarf.

And I still didn't know if I could trust Mitch, even though I found myself wanting to desperately.

Then I remembered Serena.

"She was here—Serena," I said, unable to erase the dullness from my voice. "I left her with Phyllis."

Mitch looked down at me. "She probably went back to the house. She's wandered away like this before. Don't worry, we'll find her."

"She knew about Phyllis," I repeated slowly. Mitch was still watching me. "She saw her fall from

the balcony. Someone must have carried her into the woods, and Serena must have followed and seen the whole thing. . . ." My voice trailed off. "She wouldn't tell me."

"She was undoubtedly frightened, if she saw what you think she did, but when she saw you on the path she must have felt she had to show someone." Mitch lighted a cigarette, slipped the lighter back into his pocket, and sighed.

"I'm afraid someone did kill your sister, or else there wouldn't be any reason to move her and try to hide the body."

Phyllis dead. The police notified. An investigation and questions. So now Mitch would believe me, I thought ruefully. The proof had lain back there in the vine-choked ravine.

They didn't bring Phyllis back to the house; they took her directly to Bridgeton, and I was relieved that that portion of it was temporarily over and I could lean back on the couch in the living room, where Mitch had sternly put me, my eyes closed, and try to shut out for a while the whole terrible scene. The drink he had put in my hand and told me to get down sat on the coffee table in front of me, half gone.

Someone sat down on the couch beside me. I opened my eyes. It was Florence.

"Did Serena come back?" I asked as she took my hand. I felt her grip tighten, and her face was pale and strained.

"I haven't seen her since lunchtime," she said, bewildered. "I heard you tell Mitch she was at the ravine."

I nodded.

"I hope nothing's happened to her," she said in a

frightened tone and put a hand to her throat. She paused, then rose slowly and shuddered. "It's just terrible. Phyllis must have come here without anyone knowing. But how did she die? And how did Serena know about it?" Her face was still white and drawn, and she was breathing rapidly. "What was she doing in the ravine?"

Her questions shook me out of the lethargy.

"Someone killed her; someone must have pushed her over the balcony railing," I said flatly. I thought again—if it had been an accident, she wouldn't have been moved.

"What are you saying?"

I was conscious of Florence's strangely hushed tone as she still held one hand to her throat. She knew I was implying it had been done by someone at Rutledge.

"Serena saw her fall," I said, watching her eyes widen.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded slowly.

Florence paced in front of the couch, her red silk slacks flapping around her ankles. "I'd like to know what was so secret about her coming here in the first place. Nobody else saw her. Maybe even Serena didn't."

Gabby had come in and taken a chair near the couch, looking cool and unruffled in her ice-blue pantsuit. She glanced at me quickly, giving me a sympathetic smile, but said nothing. Carolyn had been standing in the doorway listening, I realized, as she came forward slowly, Paul and Adrian behind her. Florence must have told them, I thought, and I felt strangely displaced sitting and listening to their exclamations of surprise and sympathy.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Adrian said softly, patting my shoulder. "Nasty business, but we'll get to the bottom of this. Mitch is calling the sheriff right now." His broad face was flushed, and he quickly walked over to help himself to a drink.

Florence rushed over to him. "Adrian, Serena's out there in the woods somewhere. We've got to find her."

Adrian paled. "I know. Mitch is going to look for her as soon as he calls the sheriff."

"She saw Ellen on the path and followed her. Something might have happened to her. She shouldn't be out there alone. She . . ."

Adrian gripped her arms. "No need to get hysterical. Mitch'll find her," he said calmly but in a worried tone. He came over to me, stood staunchly in front of the couch, and frowned heavily. "Ellen, what was she doing out there?"

"Nothing," I told him, "she just stood there looking over the edge of the ravine. She seemed to be almost in a state of shock."

Adrian considered this, meanwhile offering whiskey to Carolyn from a tray beside Gabby. But Carolyn shook her head and sat beside me. Her angular face looked strained and tense. She, too, wore a pantsuit, an off-beige that robbed her face of every bit of color. She leaned back, lighted a cigarette, and smoked nervously.

"Did Serena say anything?"

I shook my head. "No. She wouldn't talk. She just stood there."

Carolyn sighed and closed her eyes. "Poor Phyllis." Her voice faded.

Before I could say anything, Paul came up to me

and sat on the arm of the couch. His dark eyes moved over my face as he reached down and pressed my hand, and he gave me a long, questioning look.

"Ghastly thing about Phyllis. I'm sorry, Ellen. What was she doing here anyway?"

"I don't know," I told him dully. "She left Wellington so suddenly, and I didn't hear from her."

"Mitch thinks she was murdered." His thin face was thoughtful, frowning.

"I know," I said and shivered. It couldn't be anything else.

Sheriff Wilbur came almost immediately, and as he introduced himself he stood in the doorway, tall and lean with a rugged, angular face, black hair peppered with gray, sharp blue eyes that slowly slid around the room. He crossed with slow, deliberate steps to the fireplace, his hands in the pockets of his gray coat. Another man, short, squat, colorless, followed the sheriff and took a seat next to him, propping a notebook on one fat, crossed knee. He looked up expectantly, and Sheriff Wilbur made a quick, desultory introduction.

"Deputy Thomas," he said. The deputy nodded, unsmiling, his fat hand poised above the notebook.

"Is everyone here?" the sheriff began, raising dark, inquisitive brows.

"Everyone but Mitch and Serena. Mitch is looking for her now," Paul explained, catching the sheriff's question as the latter crossed the room. "She was out there by the ravine with Miss Ellen Chandler, here, when the body was discovered."

"She must have been terribly frightened, if she knew Phyllis was in the ravine all along—and then seeing her again like that," Florence said.

"Who is Serena?" the sheriff interrupted impatiently.

"Serena Rutledge, my young cousin, and my sister's cousin, too, of course," Paul added, gesturing toward Carolyn, who leaned forward stiffly.

The sheriff nodded as Paul introduced us, and Deputy Thomas wrote laboriously in his notebook. Then the sheriff came toward us, one hand in his pocket.

"What would Serena Rutledge have been doing by the ravine?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and Deputy Thomas continued to write with rapid strokes.

"Serena had an accident years ago," Florence said quietly, "and has been mentally unstable ever since. She often wanders around the grounds, even into the woods, but she is supposed to be watched. We never know what might happen to her."

"What sort of accident?"

Florence explained about the fire, and the sheriff nodded.

"Generally, though, she doesn't stray too far," Florence continued. "This time she followed Ellen."

"Oh, yes, Miss Chandler." The sheriff looked down at me. "I'm sorry about your sister. I understand you found the body."

I nodded.

"Want to tell me about it?"

All eyes focused on me as I hesitated, then looked up at him. "I was going for a walk along the path in the woods," I began slowly. "Then I heard something behind me. Serena was there. She—she seemed dazed. She just went by me, toward the ravine, and looked over the edge. Then I found Phyllis."

"I understand she's been missing about a month."

Again I nodded.

"Do you think Serena Rutledge knew your sister was in the ravine? Is that why she led you there, so to speak?"

"I don't know, but she could have known something about it. I think she saw Phyllis killed."

"Did she say how she was killed?"

"Someone pushed her over the balcony railing." I told him everything then, wondering how much he would believe, how much he would scoff at; but I felt he had to be told. He got out a pipe, lighted it slowly, and took a long puff on it, deliberating. His expression remained unchanged as I told him of Phyllis's departure from Wellington, the discovery of the iris in the nightstand, an identical one that Serena had shown me, and her story about the "nice lady" that had led to my suspicions. Then I described the discovery of Phyllis's body in the ravine and Serena's disappearance.

"Do you still have the iris, Miss Chandler?" he asked matter-of-factly when I had finished.

I shook my head, explaining that I had discovered it missing from the nightstand. "But Serena might still have hers," I said hopefully, wondering why he would be interested in seeing it. There was certainly no need now to prove that Phyllis had been at Rutledge.

"All right," the sheriff was saying, puffing again on the pipe. "Now then, Dr. Brent—he's also our coroner—believes your sister has been dead about three or four weeks. Death apparently resulted from a skull fracture. It could have been caused by a bad fall, perhaps from the balcony upstairs. He spoke

quietly, with a sudden apologetic glance at me, and I suppressed a shudder. He cleared his throat loudly. "Someone must have seen Miss Chandler come here." He glanced expectantly around the room, but everyone sat mute. "Did any of you know she had come here? Did any of you see her?" Irritation showed in his voice.

Adrian, standing by the couch, sighed heavily, put his glass on the coffee table, and faced the sheriff. "Phyllis's presence here is a mystery to all of us. We have no idea why she came and no one saw her arrive. My wife and I were in California attending a convention around the time she must have come here; my niece, Carolyn," he said, gesturing, "was here, but she mentioned earlier that she didn't see Phyllis or anyone else."

Sheriff Wilbur turned to Carolyn. "Is this true, Miss Rutledge?"

Carolyn frowned. "When Ellen came, she said Phyllis had been gone longer than usual and she was worried about her and wondered if perhaps Phyllis had come to Rutledge." She sighed and said, flatly, "She didn't come here. I would have seen her, wouldn't I?" She glanced at me, and her thin mouth tightened.

"Who else was here?" the sheriff inquired.

"Just Mitch. And Serena, of course. Paul was in Europe. Serena is—not well. She wouldn't be able to tell you anything anyway," Carolyn said quickly as she took out another cigarette from the pocket of her slacks. Nervously she slipped the cigarette between long, thin fingers, and Adrian leaned forward and lighted it for her.

"So none of you saw Phyllis Chandler," the sheriff

said half to himself, his hand rubbing his chin again and his sharp eyes glued to the floor. He reached into his pocket, and we watched him with nervous expectation as he slowly withdrew his hand and held it out to me.

"Do you remember seeing this before, Miss Chandler?"

I glanced down. Something brown and crumpled clung to a plain, gold pin in the middle of the handkerchief. It was the remains of an iris, a large iris, brown and dried and papery thin but like the one in the nightstand; like the one Serena had shown me.

CHAPTER X

The room whirled giddily for a moment, and I pressed my hands hard against the couch on either side of me.

"You do recognize the pin," the sheriff said as I glanced quickly at that smooth, pale gold bar and nodded, closing my eyes.

"It has the initials R.C. on the inside," he said quietly, turning it over in his hands.

I opened my eyes. "It was my mothers's. She gave it to Phyllis in her will."

"It was found in the driveway," the sheriff said, pocketing the pin. "I'm surprised no one noticed it before. One of you must have known of her arrival."

His tone hinted that someone had lied. Mitch or Serena or Carolyn, I thought, my heart pounding. Adrian and Florence and Paul would have still been away. Somehow I couldn't believe it might have been Serena, but Carolyn or Mitch . . . I shook myself inwardly and forced myself to listen to the sheriff.

He frowned. "All right. When did the rest of you return—from the trips to California and Europe, I mean?"

Adrian told him of his arrival only a short time before I had come. Paul, too, had just gotten back from the business trip to Europe. Unless, again, one of them was lying. But Phyllis had definitely been here, and in the house.

"And you, ah, Miss . . . ?" The sheriff hesitated, looking inquisitively at Gabby.

"Gabrielle Freneau," Gabby said coldly, tossing back her hair and staring at the sheriff.

"Yes, of course." He cleared his throat. "And where were you?"

Gabby crossed slim legs and swung her foot impatiently. "In Bridgeton. I have an apartment in town." She gave him a smug look and smiled urbanely.

Sheriff Wilbur paused, then turned to me.

"Miss Chandler, is there anything, any reason at all you can think of that would bring your sister here?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing?" He seemed dissatisfied.

"I can't think of anything. We hadn't been here, either of us, in over eight years. We'd got out of touch with everyone at Rugledge."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because . . ."

Deputy Thomas looked up. I stopped.

"To help Uncle Adrian with his manuscript."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Yes," I answered and was surprised to hear the sharpness in my voice.

"You didn't expect to find your sister here?"

"No."

The sheriff was deep in thought. "Your sister didn't give any idea at all where she was going? She didn't say anything?"

"No, nothing. She'd been away before but never this long. And she . . ."

"She what?"

"She seemed upset about something."

"Do you know what it might have been?"

Again I shook my head. "She just left—so suddenly, said she wasn't sure when she'd be back."

"And you didn't hear from her at all?"

"No."

"I see." He put his hands into his pockets; the pipe was clenched between his teeth. He glanced around the room, then he sighed. "That'll be all for now. Please, everyone, stay where I can get in touch with you. I may have some further questions at a later time."

He started toward the door, the deputy trailing him, notebook in hand, then he hesitated as the sound of faint sobbing from the hallway reached our ears. We all looked up, and I felt my heart beating heavily. Mitch stood in the doorway, his shirt soaked with rain and mud spattered, one arm supporting a pale, sobbing Serena. Her long, white dress was wet and soiled, and her wet, blonde hair hung in a tangled mass around her white face, half covering the scar. Florence rushed toward her with a gasp.

"She's all right," Mitch said reassuringly, "but she should be in bed. See if you can get Doc Brent over here."

"I'll call him," Paul said, rising quickly from his perch on the arm of the couch.

Florence put her arms tightly around the still-sobbing girl as Mitch released her. "Mitch, what happened to her?"

"I don't know." He frowned. "I found her in the woods about halfway from the path to the house. She was lying on the ground, crying. It's raining hard; she might have slipped on the wet moss. She didn't seem to recognize me at first, but then I got her on her feet and into the car and she rallied somewhat. She seems frightened about something."

"The poor child," Florence said sympathetically. "I'll take her upstairs." Serena slumped against her as Florence led the girl slowly up the stairs.

Mitch lighted a cigarette and confronted the

sheriff. "I tried to question her, but she's too upset now to make much sense."

Sheriff Wilbur nodded, his pipe hanging limply from his teeth. "I'll talk to her later."

Mitch turned to me. "Are you all right?"

I had been sitting there, limp and numb, listening dazedly to the sheriff's questions, answering automatically, but everything seemed to be moving around me in a haze. I heard Mitch and nodded, still unable to push away the sense of unreality, and I was aware of his close scrutiny.

"You could use some rest." He glanced at the sheriff, who nodded consent.

I started to rise as Mitch took my arm and drew me to my feet, holding me close to him.

"Upstairs. Try to get some sleep. I'll have Doc Brent leave you something."

I managed a faint smile and felt the numbness dissipate in his warm grip.

"I have a few things I'd like to clear up, if you don't mind," the sheriff said, addressing Mitch.

"Of course." Mitch released me, and I saw Carolyn glance quickly at him, smoking with short, jerky motions and frowning.

"You're a lawyer, I understand," the sheriff said to Mitch.

"That's right."

"And you handle all the legal affairs here?"

"I advise Uncle Adrian on all legal matters, yes."

"I'd like to see some of the records, if it's convenient."

Mitch nodded and led the way to his study.

"I wonder what he's looking for," Carolyn said, and her face looked white and wooden as she rose and left quietly.

"Well, I've had enough of this."

Gabby swept past me, tossing that long, brown hair and holding her head high. I had almost forgotten she was in the room.

Adrian followed her, walking heavily, stopping to put a firm hand on my arm.

"Mitch is right. Get some rest, Ellen, my dear. I'll take care of—everything."

I nodded, thanked him, and started to leave, when Paul returned and hurried up to me.

"Wait a minute, Ellen," he said and drew me back to the couch. Then he sighed. "It's really too bad about Phyllis dying that way." He glanced skeptically at me, and his lean, dark face tightened. "You don't mind if I talk about it, do you?" He sat close to me.

I shook my head. "Of course not." It had to be gone over, I knew, sooner or later.

"Think back, like the sheriff said. Maybe there's something we can ferret out, some little thing that was overlooked."

"But I've thought about it," I told him wearily. "There's nothing."

"She must have said something."

"Only that she was leaving."

"And you had no idea she would come here?"

Again I shook my head mechanically. "You know we'd been out of touch with all of you here until—" I broke off quickly and felt my face flush. Paul must have known I had been about to recall his former courtship, and he frowned and touched my hand.

"Ellen, I'm sorry. If you'd only understand. What I said at dinner the other night . . . well, it's true." He was looking directly at me, scrutinizingly, and I flushed again under that stare. "I made a mistake. I

realized that as soon as you came here—but I can change things. I thought at first there were too many complications, but I've been thinking since then. You do you believe what I said about still being in love with you...?"

Again, strangely confused, I dropped my eyes from that dark scrutiny. "I... I don't know, Paul. I don't know what I feel—it isn't the same, now. I'm sorry," I said, sounding tiredly repetitious. I thought again about what Gabby had revealed to me.

We sat in awkward silence as Paul drew on his cigarette and exhaled smoke with a sigh. Then he turned to me.

"You've taken quite a liking to Mitch, haven't you?" His voice had hardened, and he frowned darkly.

I swung around. I was conscious of a disturbing sensation at the mention of Mitch's name, remembered the closeness of his stocky body and his arms around me. Could I still believe that he might have pushed me down that flight of stairs—or that he could have killed Phyllis? There had been concern on his face when he had found me in the alcove, and then at the ravine he had been kind and understanding....

My heart was pounding strangely, and I couldn't answer him. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

"All right, I won't question you any more," Paul said resignedly.

Maybe he had changed, maybe he was sincere when he said he loved me. I tried to convince myself, yet I felt a sudden coldness between us as we sat in the dim gray of the room and the rain fell unceasingly.

Finally exhaustion overcame me, and I rose, still half dazed.

"You'd better go upstairs," Paul said firmly, reaching out a steady hand.

Weariness followed me along the dark hall and up the long, carpeted stairs as I climbed them slowly. I saw Dr. Brent coming down the hall. He waited for me at the top of the stairs.

"I expected you to be in bed," he said gruffly, touching one hand to my wrist and looking down at me over those thick glasses. "I've already given Serena a sedative."

"Is she all right?" I asked with concern.

He nodded and frowned. "Just very upset and frightened about something. I'm afraid she wasn't very coherent." He was watching me closely. "Now, about you." He still held my wrist. "Hm," he grunted, frowning again. "It's been a rough day, and I want you to take this and go straight to bed." He pressed a small, white tablet into my hand, patted my shoulder paternally, and muttered something unintelligible as he took my arm and led me to my room. He paused at the door.

"All right, young lady, remember what I told you." I was grateful that he walked me to my door—that way I could avoid looking down the hall at the balcony. The balcony where Phyllis . . . He was still frowning as I entered the room, and I heard him plod heavily down the hall.

Too tired to shower, with my mind in a deep, endless turmoil and still numbed to the reality of what had happened to Phyllis, I simply undressed, took the pill Dr. Brent had insisted on, and slid in between the soft sheets. A slight, sharp pain as I leaned back brought me to a sudden realization that I had forgotten my injured shoulder; all my thoughts

had become focused on Phyllis in the ravine and the sobbing, frightened Serena. I closed my eyes in the still-light room and listened to the steady drift of rain against the windows.

Surprisingly, I slept. It was nearly ten o'clock when I awakened to a gray, sticky morning. The rain had stopped, but a thick blanket of gray murkiness covered the sky and seemed to press in suffocatingly through the house.

There would be more questions, I knew. And Serena would have to be interrogated. A sudden thought sent a chill through me. If Serena had seen Phyllis fall from the balcony, had she seen someone else up there? Someone who could have pushed Phyllis while her back was turned, while, perhaps, she leaned against the railing looking out over the garden. Another chill passed through me. Did Serena know who killed Phyllis?

Forcing my turmoiled thoughts aside, I dressed mechanically in blue slacks and sweater. My mind was still numbed to the unbelievable events I had finally closed my eyes gratefully against. Reluctantly I left the warm security of that room with its lavender-and-white walls and beige rug, unable to shake off the strong feeling that Phyllis might also have been in the same room such a short time before, might have walked down the same staircase I was on now.

Or had she fled in terror?

CHAPTER XI

I felt myself tense as I stepped into the downstairs hall and headed for the kitchen. Florence appeared in the doorway and stopped when she saw me.

"Ellen, are you feeling better?"

I forced a smile and nodded. She looked tired. Her face was strained and white and her eyes darkly smudged; even her usually neat coiffure was disarrayed, and strands of gray hair straggled to her shoulders. She clutched a bright-red housecoat tightly around her and moved toward me with a heavy sigh.

"I don't like the way the sheriff hinted that one of us killed Phyllis." Her voice was disturbed as she put an urgent hand on my arm. "You don't believe that, do you? You don't think that one of us..." She stopped abruptly and searched my face, her lips pinched.

"Florence, I..." I began. I couldn't tell her I suspected everyone at Rutledge. It could even have been Florence.

She sighed again. "I suppose you do, and I suppose you have every right. But I didn't kill her, and Adrian didn't. I know it. And why would Carolyn, or Gabby, or even Mitch or Paul? We weren't close any more, you and Phyllis and us. We hadn't been in contact for a long time. We..." She shrugged. "I just don't know what happened, why she came here. If we only knew that." She studied me with an unswerving stare, then turned and dropped her hand from my arm. "Serena hasn't come down yet. I'm going to check on her now. Poor child, she was really

frightened last night; Dr. Brent had to give her something." She said half to herself, "I wonder why she went out there? She must have had some reason, unless she was just wandering. I suppose we'll have to talk to her." The frown on her face was replaced with a quick half smile.

"Anyway, I was coming to tell you breakfast is ready. Carolyn and Gabby are eating, but Adrian hasn't come down yet, either." Again the frown covered her still-white face. "I imagine the sheriff will be back later. He didn't seem the least bit satisfied with any of us last night." She hurried down the hall, and her feet were noiseless as she climbed the stairs.

It was Monday, I suddenly remembered, and I supposed that Paul and Mitch had already left for Bridgeton, with Sheriff Wilbur's permission. I stepped into the kitchen, trying to forget the ugly suspicions that had begun to rise. Gabby was sleepily and methodically buttering toast. Carolyn looked up from her coffee cup and held my gaze for a long, awkward second, then glanced over my shoulder and past me into the hall as we heard Florence's frantic voice. Florence stood with one hand grasped around the newel post, her face white and frightened, her other hand again clutching the robe around her.

"She's gone! Serena's not in her room!"

Gabby stopped buttering the toast in mid-stroke, and her jaw, under the tumble of hair, slackened. Carolyn slowly put her cup on the table and frowned. I stood there staring at Florence, and my heart pounded in my ears. Serena gone! She couldn't be. Mitch had put her to bed, and Dr. Brent had given her the sedative. No one had seen her since last night. I

hadn't awakened until ten o'clock under a mild sedative, and surely the sedative Dr. Brent had given Serena would have kept her asleep at least as long as that. Where could she have gone? Had she somehow slipped out of the house unseen?

"She couldn't have gone very far; she was heavily sedated." Carolyn's voice behind me, in answer to my silent thoughts, was hard and sharp.

"But she's not in her room," Florence said in a hushed tone as she came toward us.

"Then she's in the house somewhere," Carolyn added dryly. "She has to be."

I swung around. Carolyn stood stiffly beside me in the doorway, frowning and slowly putting a cigarette to her lips. A faded, flowered housecoat hugged her thin figure, and her dark hair gleamed like a shining cap above her angular face.

"I'm going to look for her," Florence announced quickly in the sudden awkward silence, as she turned back to the stairs. "Carolyn, why don't you help? It'll be faster." She touched her throat with a shaking hand, then hurried up the stairs, and Carolyn gave me a faint frown as she followed her aunt.

Gabby had moved to the kitchen window, and she stared out into the gray morning, a cup of coffee in her hand. She turned when she heard me pull out a chair, and a smile spread over her lovely face. She said nothing for a moment, just stood there demurely in a pink pantsuit. The surprise at Serena's disappearance had vanished.

"What's all the commotion about? I'm sure Serena's done this before."

I must have had a puzzled expression on my face, because she amended quickly, "Carolyn says Serena

wanders around a lot, and she didn't seem too upset because Serena wasn't in her room. Florence seems unduly worried."

"Gabby, you don't understand," I began, sitting in the straight-backed chair I had pulled out from the table and leaning forward. "Florence has taken care of Serena since she was a child. It's different with Paul and Carolyn and me. We were so young when she moved here, and we thought of her only as a playmate. It wasn't too long after that"—I felt a lump catch in my throat—"that Phyllis and I left Rutledge." I leaned back and swallowed hard. "Then Serena had that terrible accident a few years ago."

Gabby stared out the window again. "There's something odd about the accident, Paul says."

I waited, puzzled, but she didn't turn around.

"He hinted that it wasn't an accident at all, that someone deliberately locked her in that room and started the fire."

She turned then with a toss of her brown hair and walked haughtily past me and out of the kitchen.

My turmoiled thoughts were interrupted as Florence came back into the kitchen, shaken and white-faced.

"She's not in the house. Carolyn and I searched everywhere."

"She was upset," I said thoughtfully. "Maybe she went back to the ravine."

Florence frowned and smoothed back a stray hair. "I'll have to tell Adrian."

Heavy footsteps sounded along the hall, and Adrian appeared in the kitchen. "Tell me what?" He stood solidly just inside the doorway, his sharp gray eyes sliding from Florence to me, and his big, florid face darkened. "What's this all about?"

"'Serena's gone. We can't find her anywhere," Florence cried desperately, rushing to Adrian and grasping his arm tightly.

"Gone? What are you talking about?" Adrian's voice was gruff, but some of the ruddiness in his face disappeared.

"She's not in her room. She isn't anywhere," Florence repeated. Nervously she pressed a hand to her throat, and her eyes were dark in her pale face.

Adrian patted her shoulder, but his big hand was shaking visibly. "All right, take it easy. We'll find her."

"Ellen thinks she might have gone to the ravine."

"The ravine?" He frowned, drew out a cigar, and lighted it carefully. "I suppose she might have. I'll take the car and start looking there first. Have you searched the house thoroughly?"

Florence nodded with short little jerks. "Carolyn is still upstairs, but we've looked everywhere."

Strained minutes passed as Adrian, frowning and concerned, contemplated where Serena may have gone.

"She's not here."

We looked up at the sound of Carolyn's wooden voice coming from above and watched her slowly descend the stairs. She shook back her dark hair and looked directly at Adrian, and her thin shoulders seemed to sag under the flowered housecoat.

Adrian sighed again. "All right," he said gruffly, "you stay here, all of you, in case Serena comes back." He turned abruptly and walked heavily down the hall.

Time passed interminably after Adrian had left. The house was quiet and gray, with the murky sky outside hinting of more rain. I forced down breakfast,

but work was what I needed to help block out the vivid memory of Phyllis lying in the ravine and push aside the oppressive fear that something had happened this time to Serena. I told Florence I was going to do some typing on the manuscript. Carolyn agreed it was a good idea, and said she was getting dressed and would be in the den if there was any news of Serena.

I went into the study, suddenly glad to be alone. Then it occurred to me that Mitch and Paul would have to be told if Serena wasn't found. They must have left early and undoubtedly wouldn't be back until evening. Neither of them had been downstairs when I had finally awakened from my heavy sleep. Of course, that had been late in the morning. I looked out the study window into the monotonous gray that spread over the lawn and across the pool. The water looked dark and uninviting, and I remembered, as if it had been years before, that Adrian had promised to have the pool cleaned. But it wasn't important now. There were other things to think about; finding Serena—and Phyllis's funeral. I shivered at the last thought and quickly turned from the window and began to work industriously on the thick pile of papers.

Time moved swiftly as my floundering thoughts became absorbed with Adrian's graphic description of the Civil War. As before, it took me back to another century, and I gave a startled jump when I heard the tap on the door.

Carolyn poked her head in. "Sorry to disturb you, but we're having a late lunch in the dining room. Thought you might be hungry."

I realized suddenly I was. "Any news of Serena yet?"

"Nothing."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Tell Aunt Florence I'll be right there. I have just one more page to type."

She left, and I hurriedly finished the manuscript, tucked the growing stack of papers far back in the bottom drawer of the desk, and locked it, following Adrian's strict instructions.

The first clap of thunder broke through as I left the room.

The meal in the dining room was quiet and filled with tension, as we sat there eating sandwiches, with little appetite.

"I've called Sheriff Wilbur," Adrian informed us, explaining that he had searched the area around the ravine and the adjoining woods with no luck. We lapsed into silence and listened to the heavy downpour of rain splashing against the windows. Adrian smoked fitfully, and his big shoulders were slumped forward.

Finally, Florence rose and suggested we have our coffee in the living room. It seemed hours before we heard, through the noise of the rain, the sound of a motor pulling into the driveway, the slam of a car door. Sheriff Wilbur's lean figure appeared in the living room. He had apparently left his hat and coat in the hall, and he apologized for his rather damp shoes as he stood on the rug and those observing blue eyes swung around the room. Automatically I looked for Deputy Thomas, but the sheriff was alone this time. Florence offered him coffee, which he gratefully accepted.

"I understand Serena Rutledge is missing," he began prosaically, and his eyes fastened on Adrian. "When did you first notice she was gone?"

Adrian answered promptly, but he appeared to have lost the control he had displayed earlier. "Only this morning—but we've got to find her at once," he said unsteadily. "She was hysterical last night, now she's gone, and Phyllis Chandler has been killed." He broke off, then continued. "We searched the house and the grounds, but Serena wasn't there." He leaned forward, and his usually ruddy face looked pale. He was, I concluded, much more upset about Serena than he had cared to let anyone know.

"Since the discovery of Phyllis Chandler's body, I'm very concerned for Serena's safety."

Florence, beside him, gasped, and again he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Serena's not well, not really responsible in many ways. She could be in terrible danger." He spoke quickly, and his gruff voice was tinged with that new, sudden fear he couldn't disguise.

The sheriff settled back against the arm of the big, overstuffed chair and thoughtfully stroked his chin. "Yes, I understand she had an accident. Your wife mentioned it earlier."

Adrian sighed. "The incident with the fire—yes." He slowly removed the cigar that drooped from his mouth. He was frowning as he looked at it in his hand and seemed reluctant to say anything.

"Is that how she got the scar on her face?" The sheriff's eyes sharpened.

Adrian nodded.

"Have you any idea how the fire was started?"

Adrian frowned again.

"No, I'm afraid not. Nothing was ever pinpointed. There was a lot of junk in that room, and we supposed it was a spontaneous combustion type of thing."

"Were all of you here in the house at the time?"

Again Adrian frowned and put the cigar back in his mouth. "As far as I can remember, yes. What has her accident to do with all this?"

"Probably nothing," the sheriff replied, "but incidents have a way of connecting themselves even under the most unlikely circumstances. Besides, every fact, every hint of a clue has to be investigated."

The sheriff leaned back. "I didn't have a chance to question the girl yesterday about her discovery of Phyllis Chandler. You say she seemed to know about the body in the ravine?" He glanced at me for verification.

I nodded. "She stopped when we reached the edge of the ravine," I told him patiently. "The path ends there."

"Evidence certainly does point toward the certainty that Miss Chandler was murdered," the sheriff stated in a quiet voice. "Then it's feasible that Serena Rutledge knows something about her death; perhaps she did see it happen. And if she did, then she could have witnessed the removal of the body to the ravine. We've got to find that girl and question her."

"Then you think Serena's disappearance has something to do with Phyllis's murder?" Florence asked incredulously. "Then someone could have . . ." She covered her face with shaking hands.

"Stop it, Florence. We don't know anything of the kind." Adrian's voice was like a hard slap, and his grip on her arm must have hurt painfully.

Sheriff Wilbur slowly rose to his feet, and he was thoughtful as he drew out his pipe and clamped it between his teeth. "Serena Rutledge hasn't been

missing long, but under the circumstances and from what you've told me, I'm going to start a search party. We'll drain the pool and comb the woods again."

"But Serena was terrified of the water; she'd never go near the pool," Florence said quickly.

The sheriff cleared his throat noisily. "It's still possible she fell in," he answered her quietly, and she shivered under Adrian's still-restraining hand.

"Florence is right. I don't think Serena would venture near there; she never does. Besides, everyone has been told not to use the pool, since it needs cleaning and repairing."

"We can't overlook anything, Mr. Rutledge," the sheriff said adamantly. "If she was sedated and wandering around..."

"I suppose you're right. But I don't understand how she could have gone anywhere, she was so heavily sedated." Florence sat stiffly in her chair. There was silence as the sheriff considered us thoughtfully.

"You have gone over the whole house?" he asked, raising black brows.

"Quite thoroughly."

I turned at the sound of Carolyn's voice. She had moved to the flowered couch in the corner of the room, next to Gabby, who sat quietly watching, her legs crossed, swinging one foot. Carolyn leaned back against the cushions with a sigh.

"If she was in the house we would have found her."

The sheriff digested that observation, then turned to me. "Miss Chandler, would you show me to the girl's room? There are a few things I'd like to go over."

Nodding, I led the way down the hall and up the long staircase.

"I wonder what he expects to find?" I heard Gabby ask in a whisper. "Maybe there's a clue up there, something that will . . ."

"There's nothing up there. Nothing." Carolyn's voice, louder, positive.

Adrian answered something I couldn't understand as the sheriff followed me up the stairs.

CHAPTER XII

Serena's room was next to mine, furnished in much the same manner, but in shades of pink with a thick, rose-colored rug in the middle of the floor. The room was neat and simple and immaculately clean. The sheriff walked gingerly across the rug, started opening drawers in the dresser, rummaging through the contents, then closing them without a word. He walked to the closet, and I could see him searching through her dresses and robes.

I hesitated in the doorway, then started to back away, but his voice stopped me.

"Have you talked with Miss Rutledge other than when she told you about seeing the woman fall from the terrace?"

"No, I..."

"What is it, Miss Chandler?"

My head whirled in confusion. I had implied to Paul and Carolyn that I had been exploring when I had fallen down the stairs. I hadn't told them about Serena. I thought now that her desire to go to the carriage room may have had something to do with her disappearance. I suddenly felt that the sheriff ought to know about my carriage-room escapade. He listened soberly to my recital.

"I'll want to go down there later. Now, you say you were pushed down those stairs. Are you sure about that?" He sounded skeptical.

I nodded.

"Could Serena Rutledge have done it? She was presumably near the carriage room when it hap-

pened, if she did go there as she told you she intended."

"I thought so at first, but now I don't think it was Serena. She seemed so eager to talk to me, had something she wanted to tell me. I just don't believe she meant any harm. Besides, I asked her later what had happened that I didn't see her there, and she told me she had heard someone coming and had become frightened and ran." I stopped, breathless. "That someone must have heard us talking and followed..." Again I thought of Mitch opening the door and finding me in the alcove.

Sheriff Wilbur was thoughtfully rubbing his chin, and he said, "What do you know about the fire?"

It startled me. "I wasn't here. It happened five years ago, and I haven't lived here since I was seventeen. I didn't even know about it until the day I arrived."

He nodded. "Now, it does appear that Miss Rutledge did see the murder of your sister. Someone could have wanted to silence her."

"Then someone might have—" I gasped in horror at the thought.

"It's possible, unless she simply disappeared on her own. I understand she's prone to very erratic behavior." He sounded convincing enough, but I was certain, from his troubled expression, that he didn't really believe she had merely disappeared.

"Then again, as she was heavily sedated. it doesn't seem likely..." He broke off, deep in thought, and he didn't elaborate. "All right, Miss Chandler," he continued before I could say anything, "that's all for now. Please remind everyone that they're to stay where I can contact them."

I nodded and gratefully left the room.

It seemed a long time later that we heard the sheriff clump loudly down the stairs, say something to Adrian in the hallway, then walk slowly to the carriage room. My heart skipped a beat.

Apparently he found nothing of particular interest there, since when he came back he spoke only briefly to Adrian, then came directly to me. He took my arm and drew me aside.

"Miss Chandler, I examined the stairway in what you call the carriage room, and those stairs are pretty steep. You said it was rather late at night when Miss Rutledge asked you to meet her there."

I nodded.

"So you were dressed in night attire, I presume, slippers and all."

"Yes," I told him, puzzled.

"Under the circumstances, it could have been very easy to catch the toe of a slipper on the top step."

Anger flared inside me. So he didn't really believe that I had been pushed; perhaps he even thought I had made up the whole story about Serena.

"All right," he said soothingly, "I'm not discounting the fact that you could have been pushed, but it's also very possible that you simply slipped."

"But I felt those hands on my back," I reminded him.

"Are you absolutely certain?" His penetrating blue eyes cut into me.

I nodded vigorously, but some of my assurance began to dissipate under that stare, and for the first time I thought perhaps I had imagined it, that perhaps it was just a result of my nervousness, wondering

what Serena wanted, and the fact that we had to meet in the carriage room away from the rest of the house, secreted from prying ears. I slowly dropped my eyes from his scrutiny, and he said abruptly, "Stay within reach. I may have more questions." Then he turned away, before I could ask him what he had found in the carriage room, if anything. If he searched the playroom that day, I didn't hear about it. I know he talked again with Adrian, then left quietly.

"He didn't find anything." Adrian sighed, his face still rather pale under the florid coloring. "The search party is getting underway, and we're going to drain the pool."

I put my hand on his arm. "Uncle Adrian, I'm sorry about Serena, but I'm sure we'll find her." *But maybe not alive,* I thought silently, shivering at the vision of the water receding in the pool, slowly, and of what we might find at the bottom. The sheriff had hinted that if Serena had witnessed Phyllis's murder . . .

My hand on Adrian's arm was shaking, and he put a large, strong hand over mine. He tried to smile, but the attempt was unsuccessful. "God, I should have watched her more closely. She's had to be watched like this ever since the accident." He spoke as if I were not there. "It was strange, that accident. We don't even know why Serena went in the old playroom or how she possibly could have got locked in, unless she closed the door too hard and the latch slipped into place. It's never happened before. We checked it afterward; the key wasn't in the door."

"Then someone could have . . ." I stopped, dumbfounded. Paul had thought the same thing. "But why?"

"I don't like to think someone locked her in that room deliberately, but what else could have happened?"

"And the fire," I said urgently, "if it wasn't spontaneous."

"It could have been set." Adrian's face was white and hard, and he looked past me. "Serena wasn't able to tell us anything."

"But why, Uncle Adrian?" I asked again.

Adrian sighed loudly. "I don't know."

He released my hand and started to walk away. "I'll be in the den working on the manuscript until the sheriff returns. Got to keep busy." He smiled faintly. I was about to tell him that I had finished the last pages he had given me, but he seemed so preoccupied and worried that I said nothing.

The afternoon lay heavy with apprehension. Sheriff Wilbur returned with a crew of men who stood by until the pool was drained. As a light drizzle began to fall, we gathered around the pool in a huddled group, watching the proceedings with uneasiness. A car pulled into the driveway, and I looked up automatically and saw Mitch coming toward us.

"What's going on?" he asked gruffly as he came closer.

"They're looking for Serena," I told him in a shaking voice.

"Serena?"

"She's missing. We've looked everywhere. The sheriff is starting a search party. Adrian even went back to the ravine, and Florence and Carolyn searched the house. She isn't anywhere." I shivered. "They think she might have fallen into the pool somehow."

Mitch sighed. "The sedative they gave her last night—if it wore off just enough and she got out of the house...." He stopped and looked down at me. "You're shivering. Why don't you wait in the house?"

I shook my head. "I want to stay. I...have to know."

Mitch sighed, then put his jacket over my shoulders and his arm around me. We stood there watching the water in the pool slowly diminish until the crude dirt sides began to be visible. It had never been finished, I noticed. The top and a small area around the sides had been cemented, but the remainder was simply a circle of dirt with rocks and vines encircling the shallow bank. I felt hypnotized as my eyes fastened onto the receding water. Finally the bottom was exposed. I looked up quietly, saw Florence's face white and frightened as she held on to Adrian's arm; Carolyn, behind her, was smoking silently and she stared at the water with a stony expression. Gabby was next to me, huddled in a bright yellow raincoat, her eyes half turned away from the water. I realized suddenly that Paul wasn't there; then I looked back at the water. The entire bottom was revealed now, and I saw, over my pounding heart, that there was nothing there but the dirt and rocks and those clinging vines along the bank.

No Serena. Nothing.

A quiet murmur rose from the group, and I didn't resist when Mitch took my arm and turned me away.

"Come on in the house. You're going to catch cold out here."

A deep feeling of relief settled over us as we slowly walked toward the house, but it couldn't last. If Serena wasn't in the pool, she could be almost

anywhere. I looked back and saw the sheriff's men dispersing toward the woods. The search had begun.

They stayed until darkness forced them back to the house. We looked out once and saw the bright yellow dots of flashlights darting in the woods. Then the search crew tramped into the hall, hungry and tired, and Florence gave them sandwiches and coffee. Serena hadn't been found, and the men had come to a dead end.

"We'll try again tomorrow," the sheriff said wearily and left us without another word.

The rain continued sporadically on Tuesday. We all went to town for the inquest into Phyllis's death, and then we returned for her funeral. The services were carried out in the private cemetery behind Rutledge where my mother was buried.

"She belongs here," Adrian had said simply as he had proceeded to make the arrangements. We stood in a solemn group and listened to the droning voice of the minister. Paul, standing next to Gabby, was quiet and somber. He had arrived the previous night, late, in a deplorable state, Florence said. He had been drinking heavily and barely recognized the fact that Serena had disappeared. "She knows more than you think, much more," was all he had said before staggering up the stairs to bed.

I stared vacantly at them, wondering which one of them was responsible for Phyllis's death, which one could have pushed her over that railing. Florence stood there stiffly, tightlipped, and Carolyn was quietly apart from the rest of the group. I felt my breath hot and tight in my throat as I turned away dizzily, and the pale gray headstones began revolving into the smoothly cut grass. I tried then to avert my

eyes as the minister's voice grew dim and distant. Mitch, beside me, steadied me, and the pungent odor of ammonia was suddenly wafted under my nostrils.

I opened my eyes reluctantly.

"You'll be all right, Miss Chandler. Take it easy a minute."

I recognized the soothing, quiet voice of the funeral director, and I felt Mitch's arm around me as I took a deep breath.

Time seemed endless before we finally left that secluded spot and headed back to the house. Mitch immediately put me into a chair and shoved a glass of whiskey into my hand. He looked down at me and smiled faintly.

"Better now?"

I nodded gratefully and slowly sipped the drink.

Midafternoon, Florence served tea in the dining room, and Mitch announced he wasn't going back to the office until the next day. "Work there can wait," he said simply. He proceeded to repair the pool with quick-drying cement, and then refilled it with fresh, clean water. The pool reflected the still, gray sky, and its smooth surface was calm and without a ripple, as if it had never been touched.

No one mentioned Serena.

Paul left, but not without first telling me he had to talk to me again. "Tonight. It'll be late, but I've got to see you." He sounded urgent, and I agreed reluctantly.

The evening dragged. Adrian had no further pages ready to type, and the increasing rain only augmented a growing tension that left me nervously pacing in the study. The house grew quiet. Everyone must have retired early, I thought. I tried to settle down with a

book, but threw it aside when the first few pages began to jumble together.

I listened to the rain pounding heavily against the window as the events of the past few days rushed through my mind in confusion. I don't know why I thought of it then, but suddenly remembrance of the sheriff's questions about the fire loomed up before me, and I kept thinking about the playroom and why Serena had gone in there. She wouldn't be in there now, of course; the sheriff must have searched. Yet perhaps there was something, something I could recall from when I had played there as a child with Carolyn and Paul. It would also be a way to occupy my time until Paul returned. I regretted now that I had promised to wait for him. Further talk would do nothing to change my mind, and I wondered how I could have ever felt so deeply for him.

The playroom was in the back of the house, in the west wing, at the end of a long corridor that was seldom used. The old house seemed unusually quiet that night, and several floorboards creaked beneath me as I walked along carefully. It was dark in the corridor, with no light filtering through the one high, oblong window.

I never got to the playroom. Before I could reach the light switch in the corridor I heard it—the sharp whine of something whizzing through the air between my head and my shoulder. Automatically I swung back against the wall, the scream in my throat stilled, my heart beating wildly. I stayed there frozen into immobility, my hands pressed into the rough wall. As my eyes slowly became accustomed to the dark, I caught a faint quivering movement of something shiny only a few feet across the narrow

corridor and even with my head. I stared at it disbelievingly as the quivering stopped and the object stayed lodged in one of the supporting beams along the wall. I knew what it was immediately. A long, silver stiletto!

My heart pounding, I stood there in that terrible silence with my hands pressed tightly against my throat and my eyes straining to peer into the darkened corridor for a glimpse of something moving, for a faint sign that someone had been there and had thrown the deadly stiletto that had missed me by a fraction. But there was nothing, no sound, no movement, nothing but the quietness of the corridor, the persistent rain, and the vague, musty odor that permeated the back portion of the old house.

I stayed there, unmoving, for an interminable time, waiting for something to happen, my heart still beating furiously. Still nothing. I shivered. I had to get out of there, away from those musty, terrifying walls that held the stiletto. Somehow I forced my legs to move from their rooted spot and found myself sobbing and stumbling blindly along the dark, shadowy corridor, past the silent gray walls and into the hallway, pursued by a strange, prickling sensation at the back of my neck, as if at any minute I would feel the thrust of the stiletto.

With a last, loud sob I flung myself at the front door, frantically threw it open, and collided head on with Mitch Rutledge.

CHAPTER XIII

A cry of surprise escaped my dry lips. He caught me swiftly and held me upright as a cold blast of wind and rain struck me sharply in the face.

"Ellen, what's wrong?" he said urgently as I began sobbing again. I stood there in that cold wetness, swaying and breathing hard, as Mitch looked down at me, stern and questioning, his blond hair wet with rain. Finally he pushed me back inside, out of the loud moaning of the wind and the spray of the rain, and closed the door loudly with one foot.

I must have looked half out of my mind, rushing outside into the storm in a flimsy dress, sobbing hysterically, my hair flying about my face in wild disarray.

"What's wrong?" he repeated, shaking me a little when I continued to sob. "Ellen." His voice was demanding, and he frowned and suddenly tightened his painful grip on my shoulders and I cried out. My breath rose hot and ragged in my throat as I struggled to find my voice.

"I . . . I won't stay here. I won't. You can't make me. I . . ."

"What is this?" He frowned darkly, and his voice hardened. "Look, you can't go anywhere. Not tonight. The storm's bad. I just came from the main road, and the bridge is washed out."

"I don't care. I'm getting out of here. You can't stop me." I pushed my hands hard against him and tried to break away. "Please let me go."

Mitch kept his tight hold on me, then wordlessly

swung me around and moved me back toward the closed door. The dim hall light struck my eyes. His fingers continued to bite into me.

"Stop this and listen to me. You want to get yourself killed out there?" His face was angry and white.

I caught my breath and suppressed a hysterical laugh. Killed out there? I was safer out there than I was here behind these walls of darkness and terror.

"You can't go. I won't let you," he said, softer now.

I won't let you. Maybe he was the one . . .

"Tell me what happened in here," he said with sudden gruffness as he observed my disheveled appearance.

I felt so inadequate and foolish as he watched me, but my head was pounding. That swift thrust of the stiletto had been governed by someone's hand, someone here at Rutledge, and it had been thrown with deliberate, deadly intent. Again a queer shudder surged through me as I remembered the whistling sound before the stiletto sliced into the wall.

"Ellen?"

I rallied, forgetting for a brief moment that Mitch was standing there, still watching me quizzically.

"What happened?" he asked again.

I struggled to find my voice. "Someone was there. In the corridor. The stiletto . . . Someone threw the stiletto."

"What are you talking about? Make sense. What stiletto?"

"In the hall. It was dark. I saw it."

"Look," he said softly, "you've had some pretty frightening experiences since you came here, this has

been a tough day, and you're all tired out. After a good night's rest you'll be all right."

"No," I shouted and shook my head frantically, trying to make him understand. "It happened. Someone tried to kill me. First the fall down the stairs, now this. And someone killed Phyllis. Please, I want to get out of here."

My frantic pleadings were to no avail. Mitch simply put his arm tight around me and guided me into the warmly lighted, familiar, and safe living room. I pulled away from him and stood by the big overstuffed chair, my hand clutched tight and trembling on the back. Unsmiling, he watched me standing there. I could only think, Maybe it had been Mitch. . . . I felt myself turn pale.

He must have seen it because he suddenly started slowly toward me. "Hey, you're really serious about this whole thing, aren't you?" He wasn't smiling now, either, as he stood in front of me, and I tried desperately to keep my chin from quivering.

"Listen, I'm sorry if I frightened you." He took me by the shoulders, drew me away from the chair, and turned me toward him. "You're trembling," he said quietly.

I tried to stop but the attempt was unsuccessful. I thought for a minute. Somehow I just couldn't believe he would do anything to harm me, that he would want to, and yet . . .

"My God, you need a guardian," he was saying angrily.

Perhaps it was relief or the fact that my nerves had been strained beyond endurance. Whatever the reason, I suddenly burst into tears right there, my hands tight over my eyes.

"Hey, none of that," Mitch scolded me and firmly took my hands down from my face. He stood close, surveying me.

"I won't stay here," I sobbed, "I won't!"

I was frightened, but there was something else. I stopped and looked up at him. I couldn't explain what had come over me, but I felt myself quivering under his touch as he slid his hands down along my arms.

"Ellen?" he said softly, and my heart pounded strangely. "Listen to me. You can't just leave like this."

"Why? What difference does it make?" I raised a tear-stained face to him.

"Because I want you to stay." His voice was low and husky, and he was standing so close to me that if I moved even the slightest bit I would brush up against him.

"Mitch, I..."

Mitch had moved closer as I stammered for words, and his arms closed around my waist. "Come on. Stop it."

I stood there in the circle of his arms, poignantly aware of their warm comfort. He pulled me firmly to him and looked at me quietly for a minute, then bent his blond head. I closed my eyes, stiff in his arms, and felt his lips brush mine lightly.

"Tell me you'll stay," he said huskily against my mouth.

My heart began pounding, and my chin quivered unexpectedly as I tried to turn my head away, wanting him to stop—not wanting him to. A sob escaped my throat. I wouldn't get involved. I wouldn't! I had promised myself I would never again be subjected to the pain I had experienced with Paul.

His lips, warm, hard, were still pressed against mine, and I turned away. "No, please," I whispered.

Mitch dropped his arms. "You've been hurt, haven't you?" he said gently, searching my face. "Haven't you?" he repeated impatiently when I didn't answer him, wouldn't look at him. He placed his thumb and forefinger under my chin and turned my head around to him.

I looked at him and watched his blue eyes still scrutinizing me. I bit my lip. "Mitch, I'm sorry," I managed weakly, desperately wanting his arms around me, wanting the warmth of his lips on mine. But the protective wall I had built around myself refused to be penetrated, and I just stood there stiffly in his grip, looking up at his tanned and rugged face, and tried hard to control my trembling.

"Damn it, Paul did this to you," he said under his breath, still cupping my chin in his hand.

He had guessed!

His eyes were dark and serious. "Ellen, look at me. I'd never do anything to hurt you. I mean that." He was watching me closely, unsmiling. The next thing I realized he had me in his arms again, pulling me close against him, and his lips were gentle but urgent against my mouth, preventing me from pulling away.

This time I didn't. This time I slumped unbiddingly against him with a little sob and closed my eyes, and I felt the protective wall disintegrating.

It was strange how the terror and the storm, up until now so vivid and omnipresent, suddenly dissipated into near oblivion, and just as strange how perfectly natural it seemed for Mitch to be holding me in his arms with his lips warm and insistent on mine. It wasn't possible. I had never seen Mitch before I came to Rutledge this last time. Yet I felt so

warm and comfortable and safe there with the terror pushed aside, and I forgot, too, for a minute, that I had been suspicious of him. Still, a small portion of my mind, far back in its depths, failed to accept the momentary tranquility. *He could be the one,* it leered at me. No, the other portion argued contrarily. He had pulled me into his arms; he had been gentle and genuinely concerned. He had said he didn't want me to leave. Perhaps it was only an act; he wanted to gain my confidence, make me trust him. Perhaps...

I didn't want to think about him that way; I didn't want to move and I unconsciously resisted when I felt him drawing me away from him. He was looking down at me as if skeptical of my reaction and slightly surprised.

"Better now?" he questioned, and one corner of his mouth lifted, but the blue eyes were watching me closely, and he held my arms in his warm, firm grip. My eyes lowered from that dark gaze and swerved to his wet jacket, darkened by the rain. He had said the bridge was washed out, but he could have gone out into the rain and come in from the porch after throwing the stiletto. He could have been there, close behind me, like before, the accusing part of my mind insisted, when I had stumbled up the stairs and hidden in the alcove. It could have been Mitch who pushed me....

I shook myself inwardly, nodded to his question, and felt a slow flush creep into my cheeks at the thought of those accusations. They really had no basis that I could pinpoint.

He still watched me silently, waiting.

"Mitch, I was so frightened," I blurted, again pushing the insidious thoughts behind me.

"I know." He was serious as he looked at me. "I

meant what I said, and I won't let anything happen to you."

I wanted to believe him, and I wanted to stay there with him even if it meant . . I stifled a silent laugh at the absurdity of it. I should be running right now, away from him, away from Rutledge.

"I'm sorry about Paul," he said, and I forced myself to listen. "He must be out of his mind to do a thing like that to you."

"It doesn't matter," I said dully.

"It does matter—to me." Mitch tightened his grip on my arms. "It matters a great deal, Ellen. I'm in love with you. Is that reason enough?"

"Mitch," I cried shakily, too overcome to say anything more, my heart pounding, and I clung to him as he held me close. "Yes. Oh, yes!" My voice was muffled in the depths of his jacket.

He said, at length, breaking that quiet spell of contentment and kissing my bent head, "Listen. You're going straight to bed. You're exhausted. Tomorrow we'll check out your story about the stiletto."

I lifted my head, and that wonderful moment was gone. Was he trying to pacify me? He was so matter-of-fact about it. "You don't believe me," I accused suddenly, and my chin quivered.

"Ellen, look . . ."

"But I saw it in the wall. It was there. It just missed me. It . . ."

"Darling, listen to me." He held me away from him, looked down at me seriously. "If someone did throw a stiletto at you, although heaven knows where it could have come from, they probably retrieved it as soon as you were out of the corridor."

"But I could prove it was there; the marks would still be there. It sliced into one of the beams along the wall."

Mitch sighed and gripped my arms tightly for a moment. "Stubborn! All right, wait a minute and I'll get a flashlight." He left me standing there stiffly, but almost immediately he returned, flashlight in one hand. "Okay, come on."

Suddenly I shivered. I didn't want to go back there into the darkness of that long corridor, not knowing who might still be lingering in the shadows, moving surreptitiously, waiting. Maybe Mitch was right; we should wait until tomorrow. The corridor would be brighter after daylight had managed to creep through the one high window. But he was holding my arm and guiding me toward the back of the house, and I followed him meekly.

I said nothing until we were in the corridor, and then I whispered, "It was just over there, in that beam." I pointed ahead to the dark structure about midway past the window, visible now as my eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Mitch stopped and I shivered again beside him. He looked at me skeptically for a minute, then threw the light from the flash upward until it fully illuminated the beam ahead of us. We were too late. There was no stiletto stuck in the beam, and it had not fallen to the floor, we found, as he played the light along the rough boards. He was right. Someone had already taken it.

Again Mitch lifted the light to the beam and held it there. Clearly visible now was a long, narrow slash in the beam, showing yellowish white where the dark wood had been stripped away and the underneath part exposed. Mitch held the light intently on the

slash mark, moving the light up and down, then sideways. It was the only mark there, and it had definitely been made by something sharp.

"It was a knife of some sort," he said quietly. "Are you sure about the stiletto?"

I nodded wearily. "It was. I know it was. Someone must have found one somewhere and—"

"All right, but what would anyone be doing with a stiletto here?"

"Maybe there was one in the playroom—or downstairs where all those things are stored. Anyone could have got it and . . ." I broke off, trying to blot out the picture of the stiletto whizzing by my head. I felt suddenly weak. "Mitch," I whispered, my head pounding. "The accident on the stairs. It—wasn't an accident."

Mitch put his arm around me. "Okay, take it easy. Come on . . . Let's get out of here."

We left the darkness of the corridor, but I didn't stop shivering until I saw the warm light of the living room. My head ached with questions, and I suddenly swung around at the sound of a soft shuffling behind us.

"What's going on?" Gabby came toward us, sleepily rubbing her eyes and holding a pink, fluffy robe around her. Paul was behind her, and his face was flushed as if he had been drinking heavily. When had he come in, I wondered. Had it been Paul behind me? Had he come home late, found the stiletto, and waited for an opportunity to use it? He was looking at me strangely.

"What happened? Ellen, you're so pale, what . . ."

"She's all right," Mitch said equably, "but she had a bad scare."

"What is it, Ellen?"

I hadn't seen Carolyn hovering next to Paul, her hair disheveled and her face frowning sternly. She stood with her hands in the pockets of a worn lavender robe. "Scare? Then it was you I heard crying. What kind of a scare?"

I told them then about my attempted trip to the playroom and the deadly stiletto.

"Stiletto?" Carolyn's face whitened. "What stiletto?" she asked incredulously.

I shook my head. "I don't know. It was just there."

Carolyn came up to me. "But Ellen, be sensible. Where would anyone get a stiletto, of all things?" She smiled, pulled out a cigarette from her pocket, and lighted it quickly.

"I don't know," I said again.

Paul rubbed a hand through his hair. "Why would anyone do this? It doesn't make any sense." He spoke thickly and his eyes were heavy.

Mitch said suddenly, "I think we'd better call the sheriff tomorrow. This and Ellen's fall down those stairs are too much of a coincidence."

Paul agreed, then he smiled sheepishly. "I got in late. Any news of Serena yet?"

"Nothing," Carolyn told him stiffly. She sighed. "As long as Ellen is all right, let's go-back to bed. Uncle's got piles of work for me in the morning."

"I wonder what happened to Serena," Gabby said, frowning and taking Paul's arm. "It's so strange, her disappearing like that."

"Sheriff Wilbur is still working on it," Carolyn said quietly, crushed out her cigarette, and headed for the stairs.

Paul told Gabby, "Maybe the sheriff will have

more news by tomorrow. He seems to think she knew about Phyllis's death."

"I'm afraid there is a connection between Phyllis's death and Serena's disappearance," Mitch said, frowning and looking down at me. "But there's nothing we can do about any of it tonight."

Thunder rumbled close to the house, and Gabby shuddered.

"Let's go back upstairs. I don't like the storm." She stifled a yawn and turned a reluctant Paul toward the stairs, and Mitch looked down at me again.

"Now you're going to get some sleep, young lady. That's an order."

He smiled grimly and led me up the stairs. At my door he paused and took me in his arms again. "You were right about what happened tonight, and I want you to lock your door and keep it locked from now on. Promise?"

I nodded wordlessly and he cupped my chin in his hand and kissed me lightly. Then he left, and I locked the door behind him, thinking, with a furiously pounding heart, I know now it wasn't Mitch who threw the stiletto; whoever threw it had retrieved it, and there hadn't been time for Mitch to do that after I ran into the hall and he came through the front door.

And Mitch had said he loved me. He wouldn't have done anything . . .

I clung to that one certainty, remembered the comfort of his arms, and temporarily shut out the terror of the night.

CHAPTER XIV

I spent a disturbing, restless night filled with erratic dreams, and I awoke with my head pounding and the sound of rain still striking the window. The terrifying episode with the stiletto lay clearly in my mind, but somehow that urgent desire to leave had disappeared, and I realized suddenly that I didn't want to go at all. I recalled Mitch's words, with his lips warm on mine, insisting he wanted me to stay, saying he loved me, and I smiled with contentment.

Remembrance of the sound of the stiletto whistling past my head returned slowly, until an involuntary shiver coursed through me and again I wondered which one of them here at Rutledge had skulked silently behind me. Every step through the halls would now be filled with fear, and I trembled at the thought as I sat up slowly and forced myself out of bed, dressing hurriedly in slacks. The sheriff would undoubtedly be back; Mitch would call him, and there would be more questions, more suspicion.

Surprisingly, I found everyone seated around the dining-room table. Mitch rose and came quickly to me. He sighed but smiled faintly.

"Are you all right?" His blue eyes held mine. I nodded and sat down.

"Sheriff Wilbur wants to see us all here for questioning today," he said. "I called him about the incident last night. It seems he's found something he believes rather important, so he was planning on coming anyway."

Florence said, glancing first at Adrian and then at me, "Mitch told us what happened. I just don't

understand any of it." She shivered, and Adrian leaned forward.

"No more wandering, my dear, until this thing is cleared up." He looked directly at me and frowned, and his wide face looked pinched.

I nodded silently and averted my eyes.

We ate quickly. Gabby, unusually talkative, cut into the quiet, strained meal with innuendoes that one of us had certainly killed Phyllis and probably killed Serena, too. "And then the strange attack on Ellen last night . . ."

"Stop it, Gabby," Paul said sharply, swinging around. "We know nothing about what happened to Serena. Someone did intend to harm Ellen, obviously; that much we do know, but that's all." He nervously rubbed his thin chin. Gabby sulked, and Carolyn appeared distant and morose.

"What do you suppose he found?" Florence asked in a low voice, and her face was noticeably pale.

"Could it be about Serena?"

Adrian paled. "If he'd found her he would have let us know right away, I'm sure. It could be just something more about her disappearance."

"I hate it." Carolyn rose abruptly and impatiently crushed out the cigarette she had been smoking. "All the questions, not really telling us anything, suspecting us all. . . ."

Adrian sighed and leaned back and rubbed his face. "This thing has got to all of us, but I suppose the sheriff has a right to be suspicious. After all, someone did kill Phyllis, and Gabby is right, you know. It has to be someone here." His voice hardened as he suddenly stopped, and blank faces stared at him.

"Well, it's true," he expostulated, "and we all know it. Might as well get it out in the open."

No one replied. We continued to look at him, and he seemed to be struggling for something to say. It was a relief to hear the sound of a car door slamming and know Sheriff Wilbur had arrived. Carolyn sat down again.

It was just like before. Tense and suspicious, we watched Sheriff Wilbur's tall, gray figure come slowly toward us, wondering what new element was to be revealed. The short, squat Deputy Thomas trailed close behind, clutching his notebook in one hand.

"Looks like everyone's here," the sheriff said, placing himself in the one empty, straight-backed chair at the end of the table. "I'll conduct the questioning right here, if you don't mind. You remember my deputy?" He gestured with one hand, and Deputy Thomas smiled briefly and found himself a seat.

Adrian grunted something, and the sheriff cleared his throat. His gray eyes appeared half closed, but I caught his close scrutiny as he glanced around the room.

"Miss Chandler," he began, looking directly at me, "suppose you tell me what happened last night."

I hesitated.

"I understand you believe someone tried to kill you," he prompted, and the tone of his voice didn't divulge whether he believed me or not.

"Someone—in the corridor—threw a stiletto," I said, struggling to find my voice. "Mitch must have told you."

"Yes, he told me," the sheriff answered noncommittally. "And where is the stiletto now?"

"I . . . don't know. Whoever threw it must have taken it out of the wall. It wasn't there when Mitch

and I went to look," I said breathlessly and glanced at the deputy, who was writing rapidly.

"I see." The sheriff frowned at me dubiously. "Do you have any idea who might have done this?"

"No," I said truthfully, but as I spoke I found myself thinking about Gabby. She disliked me openly, but would she be capable of attempted murder? Yet any one of the others, although I admittedly had discounted Mitch . . .

"Could the stiletto have come from this house?" The sheriff's cool voice jolted me from my ruminating.

"I don't know. I suppose it could have. There are a lot of old things in the cellar and the storeroom; at least there used to be." I glanced quickly at Florence, and the sheriff followed my gaze.

"Is that right, Mrs. Rutledge?"

Florence paled slightly and poked at her neat, graying hair. "Yes, there are still a lot of antiques in the house. Maybe there was a stiletto that someone picked up somewhere long ago. I don't know. I never saw one." She hesitated and frowned. "Or maybe . . . Paul, you didn't bring one back from Eu—?"

Florence stopped, catching herself too late. She touched her lips with a trembling hand. "Paul, I didn't mean . . ."

Paul flushed. "Don't worry, Aunt Florence. I didn't bring any stiletto into the house." He rose, walked quickly to the sideboard, and poured himself a drink. "I don't know any more about it than any of you. It could have been here for a long time, but I never saw it, either." He remained standing as he shifted his drink from one hand to the other. Sheriff Wilbur and his deputy exchanged brief glances.

"Sheriff, if there was a stiletto around somewhere,

I would have known about it," Adrian said loudly, leaning forward. "I've gone over the storage items a number of times, and I never came across any stiletto. Isn't it possible it came from outside? You know, someone sneaking into the house, bringing the stiletto, with one thing in mind?"

"It's possible," the sheriff agreed. "If you want to consider that someone outside of the house is responsible for the deed and also for the murder of Miss Chandler. But a stiletto doesn't seem a plausible weapon for one to be walking around with. It's more likely something that was stored somewhere, long forgotten, then conveniently picked up. Anyway, I hesitate to consider very strongly that it might be an outsider. It's almost a certainty that it wasn't."

There was a long moment of silence as Sheriff Wilbur rose to his feet, put his hands into his pockets, and walked to the window. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and the sky was a dull, murky gray.

"Miss Chandler, were you on good terms with your sister?"

He swung around, hands still in his pockets, gluing those sharp, blue eyes under the half-closed lids directly on my face. Deputy Thomas looked up.

I must have looked askance at the sheriff, not quite comprehending what I knew he was insinuating.

"Any disagreements, quarrels?"

"Of course not," I answered him adamantly and caught the surprised expressions of Adrian and Florence.

"Well, that sort of thing can be very commonplace when two sisters or brothers are engaged in a business. It would be normal to have disagreements occasionally, whether personal or pertaining to business management."

"But we didn't, at least nothing of importance," I insisted firmly.

"You were compatible, then, as far as the business is concerned?"

I nodded emphatically.

"And your personal life. No problems there?" His black brows arched, and he ran a hand through peppered gray hair.

"No," I said quickly. "Nothing that concerned Phyllis." She had known about Paul but had never voiced an opinion either way.

"Did you talk with each other a lot?"

"No, not really. Phyllis was away quite often, and we never were extremely close." My voice faded. It was still difficult to speak of her.

Sheriff Wilbur lowered his brows and considered my explanations thoughtfully. "Now, then, tell me, Miss Chandler, are you absolutely certain you didn't see your sister after her sudden departure from the dress shop?"

I felt a frown crease my forehead.

"Of course I'm certain. I had no idea where she was going, and I didn't see her after that, not until—until Serena and I found her in the ravine."

Deputy Thomas wrote thoughtfully, and the sheriff frowned but said nothing. Then he walked back to the chair, sat down slowly, and leaned forward. "Do you own an identification bracelet?"

The abruptness of his question stunned me. I had to think. I remembered a thin, silver bracelet that my mother had given me as a child and how I had treasured it. Somehow it had got lost.

"I had one once, but I lost it."

"Do you remember where you had it last?"

I shook my head. "No. My mother gave it to me a

long time ago. I don't remember exactly when I lost it; it was just gone one day." Something flashed in front of me as the sheriff pulled out a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket and opened it slowly. I looked down at the small, familiar bracelet lying in his hand, and an involuntary gasp rose in my throat.

"Is this it?" His voice was flat and he spoke softly.

"It looks like it."

"The lettering is worn, but under a magnifying glass I deciphered several letters of your name."

So it was mine. But why was it significant?

Sheriff Wilbur watched me silently, then said in that same quiet voice, "We found it next to your sister's body. It was just barely covered with dirt. Looked like it had been dropped there." He stopped. Carolyn shifted her position on the couch, and Gabby coughed.

I hesitated, turning from the sheriff's questioning scrutiny, and caught Mitch's perplexed expression under raised brows.

"Did you drop it there, Miss Chandler?"

Adrian cleared his throat and leaned forward. My heart pounded.

"No. I couldn't have. I'd lost it."

Deputy Thomas glanced up, studied my face with colorless eyes, then continued to write in the notebook.

"Are you positive of that?" The sheriff levelled that bright blue gaze at me.

"Yes."

He cleared his throat, looked down at the bracelet in his hands, then carefully rewrapped it and put it into his pocket. "You say that you and your sister had no quarrels of consequence. Is that right?"

I nodded and sat staring at his lean, impassive face.

"You also contend that you have no idea why she might have come here." He didn't wait for a reply. "You didn't say something to her that might have upset her?"

"No." I felt my brow crease into a frown.

"Had she mentioned any disturbing news she might have received recently?"

"No," I repeated tiredly. "I just know she seemed —troubled when she left. That's all."

He came closer and stood there still scrutinizing me. "You didn't quarrel with your sister, perhaps threaten her, then follow her here, push her over the railing of the balcony upstairs, and bring her body to the ravine?"

"No!" I jumped to my feet.

"It wouldn't have been too difficult," he continued unperturbed as I stared unbelievingly at him. "Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge were in California, I understand; Paul Rutledge was in Europe. Miss Freneau was in her own apartment. Only Carolyn Rutledge and Mitch Rutledge were here at the house and they were probably in town at convenient times; Serena Rutledge I don't believe would have given you any trouble. It would be a simple matter to put your sister in the car and drive her to the ravine."

His voice droned on as I stood there shaking my head in denial.

"Is that what happened?"

Again I shook my head. "I didn't see her; I wasn't here."

"You didn't argue and suddenly decide, in a quick moment of anger . . . ?"

"I didn't," I shouted. "I didn't kill her!"

Someone gripped my shoulders from behind and

lowered me to the chair. I heard Mitch's voice calm and quiet. "Take it easy, Ellen." I swallowed hard over the frantic beating in my throat.

"Your bracelet was found in the ravine," the sheriff said coldly.

"But I don't know how it got there," I told him in a strained whisper. "Maybe after I lost it Phyllis found it and forgot to return it. It could have been in her purse and fallen out. . . ." I stopped my sudden rush of words.

"Your sister's purse was buried in the dirt; the bracelet was lying on top of the ground."

"Why would I want to kill her?" I asked incredulously. "And someone did push me down the stairs; then last night the stiletto . . ."

"The fall could have been contrived, Miss Chandler, to make it appear to be an attempt on your life."

He hadn't changed that stalwart position in front of me, and his voice was still cold and stabbing.

"You think that I deliberately . . . ?"

"And the stiletto has not been found."

"But the marks on the wall, the . . ."

"Also could have been put there deliberately."

Speechless, I stared at him as he moved away and again reached in his pocket and withdrew a white handkerchief. He unfolded it carefully, and I could feel the tension in the room as everyone leaned forward to see the bit of paper lying in that white cotton square. The scrap of paper was mud stained and yellowed, I noticed, as the sheriff walked slowly to me and held out his hand.

"Have you seen this before?"

The writing was barely discernible; the ink had

bled from being wet, and a jagged tear had cut off parts of the words. I stared down at the few blurred, typewritten letters that were legible: Plea... I... wan... terr... is... inv...

The fragments of words swam before my eyes.

"Miss Chandler?"

"I never saw it before," I said in a barely audible voice.

"It, too, was in the dirt," the sheriff explained. "Just this one scrap. I'm afraid it's completely indecipherable in its present state."

"It doesn't make any sense," Gabby said. "What does it mean, and how did it get there?"

Florence shook her head and sighed. "I don't know. Poor Phyllis. If only we'd been here when she came, perhaps..." Her voice faded.

"Well, I didn't kill her," Gabby said, pouting and tossing back her long hair.

"No, nor I, but somebody did." Paul frowned, his face unusually flushed, and he lighted a cigarette. He glanced quickly at me and then averted his gaze, and I suddenly wondered what it was he had wanted to talk to me about the night before. Had it had something to do with Phyllis?

The sheriff was silent, watching us and listening to the fragments of conversation, then he headed for the door. "I want to make another complete search of the house and grounds, if you don't mind."

Adrian rose. "Of course, sheriff, if I can help in any way..."

"That won't be necessary," the sheriff said with sudden abruptness.

Carolyn stood up, looking slightly exasperated. "Really, sheriff, I do have to go to town."

The sheriff considered her for a minute, then nodded. "All right," he said hesitantly, "but keep in contact."

"Paul, may I borrow your car? I seem to have misplaced my keys."

Paul frowned at her, ground out his cigarette, and wordlessly handed her his keys. Carolyn excused herself, tossed me an impenetrable glance, and left the room.

The sheriff swung around. "You inherit the dress shop now, is that right, Miss Chandler?"

I nodded mutely as the sheriff studied me thoughtfully with an expressionless face, then turned and left me standing there.

CHAPTER XV

Sheriff Wilbur began his announced search of the house over Gabby's protests about "invasion of privacy." He was, I knew, still trying to locate a clue as to Serena's whereabouts. I knew, too, he still suspected I had killed Phyllis, and I wondered if he thought me responsible for Serena's disappearance. The evidence against me was only circumstantial, but frightening nonetheless.

Mitch had left the room to talk to the sheriff, and as I rose, feeling shaky and disoriented after the sheriff's accusations, Adrian came up to me and put a comforting arm around my shoulders.

"Skip work today, my dear. I know you're unnerved about all this. I haven't that much prepared anyhow." He smiled ruefully. "Don't worry, the sheriff can't prove anything. We know you didn't kill Phyllis."

"He's right, Ellen. There wouldn't have been any reason." Florence sat tightlipped in the chair next to me.

I shivered and started to move away, and Adrian removed his arm. Gabby began clearing the table, watching me with half-closed eyes.

"It's absurd to think Ellen would have anything to do with it, isn't it?" Insinuation lay in her eyes and her voice, and I realized then her intense dislike of me.

Even working would be better than staying here and enduring these hidden accusations, I decided, and said I was going upstairs. At the top of the stairs, I felt a cool draft and realized the balcony door had been

left open. I started to close it, then changed my mind and stepped outside and leaned against the railing, savoring the damp air and the light mist against my face as the rain spattered on the cement below. The green of the trees, accentuated by the rain, stood out in sharp relief against the gray sky, and the dull gray water in the pool rippled gently as the rain struck the surface.

My mind was racing with the echo of the sheriff's voice flinging those bits of evidence at me. But I hadn't killed Phyllis. Someone else had, possibly while she stood right where I was now, against the railing, looking down. Someone had come toward her, threatening, pushing until she lost her hold and fell to the terrifying depths below....

"Ellen?"

With a startled cry I swung around. Paul was standing in the doorway, tall and lean and dark, watching me soberly. Then he quietly closed the French doors behind him. He came up to me, offered me a cigarette, which I took, lighted one for himself, then stood next to me against the railing.

"Are you okay? You look so white."

"I was just thinking about Phyllis," I told him, shivering and moving away from the railing.

"Here, sit down. I've been wanting to talk to you."

I sat in one of the wicker chairs, and Paul drew another up beside me.

"Last night when I asked you to wait for me I said I'd be late, but didn't expect to be as late as it turned out. And then I had to take the long way because the bridge washed out. When I did come in..." He stopped, frowned.

"Were you waiting?" I said suddenly, my voice trembling. "You knew I'd be up, you knew . . ."

"Stop it. Don't look like that. I didn't have anything to do with the accident. I don't know anything about a stiletto." He looked angry and hurt and very innocent just then.

"I'm sorry," I said and sat back with a deep sigh, watching the smoke curl up from the end of my cigarette. He turned to me and took my hand in his. I didn't have the presence of mind to even pull away.

"Ellen, I wish you'd think about what I said, about—"

"Paul, we've been over all this. Nothing's changed."

He sighed resignedly. "Okay, forget it for now, but I can be very persistent." He gave me one of his sudden, charming smiles that lighted up his lean face, and he looked very boyish. "Look. It was something else I had in mind last night, something I have to ask you." Again he sighed. "You know about the debts, but there are other problems, too, that I can't tell you about right now. But I need money, and I thought you might be willing . . . You do have a share in the dress shop anyway, don't you? And now it'll be all yours."

I nodded, too stunned with rising anger to speak. Paul continued.

"If you could sell the shop and loan me the money, I'd make it up to you. We could even—eventually . . ." He stopped when he saw the strange and angry expression I knew covered my face.

I swallowed hard. The courtship in Wellington, everything, had been only a pretense to get money from me to pay off his self-inflicted debts. He didn't love me; he never had. But I had let myself believe

otherwise. It was strange, I thought with sudden and surprising realization, that it didn't seem to matter. Besides, I had no intention of selling the shop now that I was faced with the idea. I had learned a good deal about the business from Phyllis, and with a little experience I could continue her efforts.

Paul watched me with expectation. I rose quickly. "I'm sorry, Paul, but everything is tied up in the shop, and I just can't do anything about it right now. I'm not sure yet what I'll do. Maybe I'll keep it and . . ." I looked at him sitting there dejectedly, the smile and jubilance gone, his face once again just plain and thin and frowning. "I want to keep things as they are."

He rose then, slowly, and his thin shoulders sagged as he looked directly at me. "Has Gabby talked to you?"

I nodded.

He put the cigarette to his lips, drew on it long and hard, and I thought he was about to say more, when I heard Gabby's voice, disgusted and loud, from below.

"It's so damn hot, but now it's raining. If it doesn't start thundering I think I'll go for a swim anyway."

Her voice drifted away, and Paul gave me a twisted little smile but said nothing as he left the balcony.

The balcony suddenly felt cold and damp, and I closed the French doors and went back downstairs. Something Paul had said stuck in my mind. My share of the dress shop—the whole shop now being mine. I realized I hadn't even thought about it, with my mind dwelling on Phyllis's death and Serena's disappearance and the accidents that I was so sure had been anything but. I would have to go back to Wellington, I supposed, as soon as the sheriff gave permission, to

get things settled. I couldn't face the long drive now or concentrate on any legal details as long as Serena was missing, but maybe a short drive in the rain would be therapeutic, I decided.

I slipped on a light jacket over my slacks and hurried through the drizzle to the garage. My car was still parked where Mitch had left it the night of my arrival, next to the maroon sports car that I assumed was Carolyn's. She had gone to town, I remembered, but had misplaced her keys and taken Paul's car. On the other side of the garage a big gray Dodge was parked, bearing RUT license plates, which I knew belonged to Adrian.

I backed my small blue sedan out of the garage and had it half way down the driveway when I saw Mitch coming toward me at a fast pace. I stopped.

"Where are you going?" he asked gruffly through the half-opened window, but a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Just for a drive," I told him meekly.

"I don't think you ought to."

"I won't be long. The sheriff didn't say . . ."

"It's nothing to do with the sheriff. It's you. You're upset, and you shouldn't be driving."

He frowned. "Move over."

"But I . . ."

"Move over," he repeated, opening the door, and I was forced to move across the seat. "I'll drive." He looked at me and smiled faintly. "How about dinner in town?"

"That would be nice," I said, returning his smile as I leaned against his shoulder and felt the first hint of relaxation creep over me since he had left me the night before.

"Good girl." He smiled, reaching over and

squeezing my hand, and his lips brushed mine, lightly at first, then insistently, and I thought, I love him; I want to be with him always.

He drew back finally, kept an arm around me, and cautiously guided the car over the temporarily repaired bridge. Mitch drove slowly and talked about his coming to Rutledge years before as the family lawyer; how he had become a sort of guardian to the disturbed Serena.

"There's still something about that fire that bothers me," he said over a quiet dinner. "Why she went to the playroom in the first place, what she wanted in the trunk, and how the fire got started."

"Was the trunk opened afterward?"

"Not that I know of. Only Adrian and Florence knew the contents of the trunk, and they said they couldn't imagine what Serena would want in it. They had it moved downstairs, I think, probably into the old carriage room."

The carriage room! Was that why Serena had wanted to talk to me there?

"That night I was pushed down the stairs," I began breathlessly, "maybe Serena wanted to show me something in the trunk. She must have remembered something, how she had tried to open it before, and . . ."

"Wait a minute," Mitch soothed, putting his hand over mine. "Don't forget it could have been just a trap. Serena might never have gone down those stairs at all; she could have been waiting behind you, and then crept up slowly and pushed you."

There was something in the tone of his voice . . .

"You really *do* believe that someone pushed me, tried to kill me!"

"I never doubted it for a minute."

"But you didn't seem to think . . ."

"I didn't want to frighten you by implying the seriousness of it."

"And the stiletto?"

He nodded. "I don't like it, Ellen. I want you to keep out of the halls at night, and watch your step. They could try again."

"But why?" I was perplexed.

"I don't know." Mitch frowned and was quiet. Then he said, "Maybe someone thinks you know something dangerous."

"About Phyllis's murder?"

Again he nodded.

I looked at him steadily. "Why did you bring me here? Were you afraid to let me drive because you thought someone might have tampered with my car?"

The startled look on his face revealed my statement as true.

"Partly," he admitted, tossing it off as lightly as he could in the face of my knowledge. "But I still didn't think you should be driving, anyway. Besides, I wanted a chance to talk to you." He smiled and squeezed my hand again. He seemed honest and sincere, everything that Paul wasn't, and I wondered then how I could ever have thought Mitch responsible for the accidents.

He asked me again about Phyllis.

"Mitch," I said in a loud whisper, "the sheriff thinks I killed her, maybe because of the dress shop, and he did find the bracelet. . . . And he thinks the accidents were contrived. But someone did push me; someone did throw the stiletto. Someone—"

"I know. Take it easy. It's his job. He has nothing

else to go on right now. He knows it's possible someone else got hold of that bracelet and dropped it there purposely; it's just that right now you appear to be the prime suspect."

I knew he was right, and I tried, then, to forget about it and enjoy my meal.

The ride back to Rutledge was leisurely, and I sat quietly next to Mitch as he talked about Serena. I remembered suddenly something Gabby had said about Serena. "Paul thinks Serena was deliberately locked in the playroom and the fire set. Gabby told me."

Mitch frowned. "I thought about that, too, but didn't put too much stock in it at the time. I wonder if maybe he's right."

"But why would anyone . . . ?"

"I don't know." He was still frowning thoughtfully.

"Mitch, what could have happened to her?" I asked in a frightened voice. "Could someone have . . . ?" I stopped and a shiver passed through me.

"I'm afraid we have to consider the possibility," Mitch said with a sigh, and his mouth hardened—"especially if the fire was deliberate. Someone may have tried to kill her then and succeeded this time."

Again I shivered. Serena disappearing, just as Phyllis had—and Phyllis had been found dead!

And someone had tried to kill me!

I must have looked frightened because Mitch suddenly took one hand from the steering wheel and placed it over mine. "The sheriff will find her," he said quietly, and I thought, *As we did Phyllis?*

It was still light and the drizzle had stopped as we again navigated the narrow bridge and slowly wound

up the long driveway. I couldn't stop thinking about Serena, and I sat silently as Mitch parked the car next to Carolyn's. Preoccupied, I opened the car door and my purse slid to the garage floor. I bent to retrieve it, and a bit of bright green on the floor next to the back tire of Carolyn's car caught my eye. It was partway under the car and barely noticeable except from the angle from which I had seen it. I retrieved my purse, walked a few steps to Carolyn's car, and picked up that bit of color. It was a ribbon, long and green and satiny like the ribbons Serena often wore in her hair. This one was crumpled and dirt stained and frayed on one end, but I knew it could be Serena's. Mitch saw me there, and he crouched beside me.

"Did you find something?"

I nodded and showed him the piece of stained ribbon.

He frowned. "Serena's?"

"I think so."

"I wonder when she lost it—before or after she disappeared."

The sheriff hadn't found it.

Mitch seemed deep in thought as he contemplated the ribbon. "We'll ask Florence what she changed Serena into the night I brought her back from the ravine; you remember her gown was drenched, and Florence said she would see about dry clothes. She'd know, too, what was missing from Serena's closet."

I felt shaky as Mitch helped me to my feet.

"It probably doesn't mean too much," he said soberly. "That ribbon could have been there a long time, unnoticed."

"Maybe she was running, frightened, after you brought her back from the ravine, and it slipped off.

But then she'd be around here somewhere. We haven't seen her since . . ."

"She was given a sedative, remember. I don't think she could have gone far. I even doubt she recovered enough from it to leave the room. She was given a much stronger sedative than you."

"Then someone must have taken her from the room," I said, perplexed.

Mitch stood there looking at me. "The sheriff believes that's exactly what happened, although he hasn't said so openly."

"Then what happened to her? Where is she?" I raced on. "He thinks I . . ."

"He hasn't made any accusations yet; he really doesn't know who would have a reason to do anything to Serena—unless, of course it was whoever started that fire five years ago. . . ." His voice drifted off, and I knew what he was thinking.

"The sheriff made a thorough search again, both the house and the grounds," Mitch continued before I could say anything, and I remembered the sheriff's announcement before Mitch and I left for Bridgeton.

"Come on. Let's find Florence, and then I want to see the sheriff."

CHAPTER XVI

We caught Florence coming down the stairs, and she frowned when she saw us. "I told the sheriff you'd be back shortly, but I think he was a little disturbed that you had left. I don't believe he's found anything yet, although there isn't a room he missed; even the carriage room and the playroom. I'm sure there's nothing there that would interest him, but that's the second time he's been in the carriage room. He said something about clues and Serena's disappearance."

I glanced at Mitch, but his face remained impassive. Florence put a trembling hand on his arm.

"What could have happened to her? Adrian's so upset, and I..."

"We'll find her. Sheriff Wilbur's being very meticulous in his search," Mitch told her quietly. He paused a minute. "You remember Serena was drenched when I brought her in from the ravine, and you got her into dry clothes and put her to bed."

Florence nodded.

"What did you put on her?"

"Her long green nightgown. It's her favorite, and I thought it might cheer her up to wear it. She was so depressed when you found her."

"Did you put a green ribbon in her hair?"

Again Florence nodded. "Her hair was wet, and I tied it back out of the way."

"Let's see if that gown is missing from her room."

Mitch took my arm and started up the stairs, and Florence followed.

"You think she was wearing it when she

disappeared?" Florence's voice sounded loud as we silently climbed the stairs.

"It's very likely." Mitch showed her the soiled green ribbon, and Florence gave a sharp intake of breath.

"Where did you find it?"

"On the garage floor," I told her, trying to keep my voice calm.

"Garage?" Florence put a hand to her mouth. "Then she must have been there, she must have . . . But how? She was sedated and she . . ." She stopped.

Mitch said, "We think maybe someone brought her out of the house, probably to the garage; there might have been a struggle, and she could have lost the ribbon."

"She's dead," Florence said dully. "Adrian has been so afraid all along."

"We still don't know for sure," Mitch said quietly and touched her arm.

My pulse was racing. The sheriff had searched the house and grounds and presumably the garage too, but the ribbon hadn't turned up. Was it possible that Serena had been in the garage after the sheriff's search? But then where was she during the search? The ribbon had been in an almost undetectable spot next to the wheel of Carolyn's car. With her car in and out of the garage it was possible the wheel had covered the ribbon and it had gone unnoticed. Then Carolyn had mislaid her keys, and the car had stayed in the garage. . . .

I came back to that same terrible question: Where was Serena?

The three of us quietly entered Serena's room, and

Florence hurriedly ran through Serena's closet; her hand shook as she pushed aside the dresses and skirts, frantically searching for the green gown.

"It isn't here," she said in a trembling voice after a quick but thorough examination of the closet. She swung around. "She disappeared the same night you brought her from the ravine; she must have, and she had on the green nightgown."

Mitch frowned thoughtfully. "Is the sheriff still here?"

Florence shook her head. "He left right after you did, but he said he'd be back."

"I want to talk to him and see if he's found anything. The ribbon isn't much to go on, but it does suggest Serena was in the garage at one time." He sighed. "Try not to worry," he said, putting an arm around Florence's shoulder. "Maybe the sheriff has something."

Florence smiled faintly as we left Serena's room. "I've got to tell Adrian about this. He's not been able to work at all today. He loves Serena very much, you know." Her eyes developed a faraway look and her voice trembled.

Mitch said nothing; he just squeezed her arm comfortingly.

Florence started down the hall, and Mitch turned to me.

"Remember about the door," he said, looking at me closely, then tilting my chin and kissing me lightly.

Sheriff Wilbur came shortly afterward, consulted Mitch, and they headed for the study. I knew Mitch would show him the ribbon and wanted to believe

that somehow it would be a clue to Serena's whereabouts.

I fell asleep thinking about her.

The next morning, the storm had vanished and with it the oppressive heat, leaving the air with a cool, welcome crispness. I changed hurriedly into my yellow bathing suit, carelessly tied my hair back, knotted my terrycloth robe loosely around my waist, and went downstairs. Crossing the terrace, I started down the long stretch of flagstone steps to the swimming pool. The stones were warm under the thin soles of my sandals, and the sun beat hotly against my face. The steps ended, and I picked my way carefully along the narrow, rough path, remembering my conversation there with Gabby.

I shook myself, loosened my robe, and found a comfortable spot on the grassy slope above the pool. I sat unmoving, absorbed in the tranquility of the morning, the warmth of the sun against my face. The cloudless sky was a soft, restful blue, and I could feel the tension slowly dissipate as I closed my eyes and half leaned back on the grass.

Sheriff Wilbur hadn't seen any evidence of the ribbon in the garage, Mitch had told me over breakfast; either he had overlooked it, he admitted ruefully, or it had not been dropped until after the search. Still, it should be looked into, he felt, and he was certain now that Serena had been taken from the house.

I tried to make my mind a blank and not conjure up pictures of Serena with that persistent, nagging reminder of what might have happened to her. It was

to no avail, and the feeling of quiet isolation didn't last. The air was still but edged with a chill sharpness, and after only a few minutes I was wrapping the robe tightly around me.

My eye caught something then, against the foliage-covered edge along the bank at the far end of the pool, something bright and bulky. I stared at it for a long time, trying to make out what it was. Then my curiosity got the best of me, and I was suddenly in the chill water and swimming toward the object. When I reached the end of the pool, I was tired and out of breath; I dubiously stretched out my hand.

The object dislodged itself from under my fingers, and I saw the lifeless body of Serena Rutledge bobbing up and down with the motion of the water. Suddenly I was icy cold with shock and disbelief, and my head spun giddily as the pool wavered in dizzy swirls. I tossed tangled, wet hair out of my eyes and reached out to steady myself, but there was nothing except the vastness of the pool around me and that grotesquely swollen form.

I wanted to cry out, to scream, but numbness covered me like a thick blanket. My legs ached from treading water, and I found myself sobbing and tugging at the body in front of me as it loosened itself and floated away from the shore toward the deeper section of the pool. Flashes of bright green were visible through the softly lapping water as Serena began tossing again, crazily, up and down, up and down....

Frantically I reached for her. She sagged heavily under my faltering grasp, and in sudden desperation I tightened my numb fingers around one pale, motionless arm as the intolerable weight pulled me to

one side. It didn't help. She kept slipping away, carried by the motion of the water, and I had to reach for her again as her body floated lethargically toward the middle of the pool. I had known, at once, instinctively, that she was dead and had been for some time. The water had already done its damage.

But she can't be dead, my mind insisted. Not sweet little Serena, whom I was sure had wanted my help.

My arms throbbed painfully with the effort of holding up that dragging weight and trying to keep myself afloat, but I couldn't let go of her. Grimly gritting my teeth, I held on. Then, slowly, I could feel the last of my strength ebbing. Frantic sobs tore from my throat as I found myself sinking back down into the cold sharpness of the water, unable to pull myself up. It slapped around me, pulling me tenaciously into it as I floated beside Serena, my legs treading water more and more slowly.

I forced my eyes to stay open as I watched her gradually pulling away from me, her long hair spread out on the surface of the water in a pale nimbus behind her.

So still and silent...

My lungs were bursting. My legs stopped treading. In another moment...

"Let go, Ellen."

Someone was forcing my hands free, roughly, urgently shouting at me. I felt Serena's lifeless weight released from my persistent grasp as my fingers were pried loose. I remember crying out once in pain from my cramped muscles and struggling vainly against that hard, restraining grip.

"Serena!" I cried hysterically. "She's dead.... I saw her.... She's..."

"Stop it, Ellen. Stop it!"

The sharp slap across my face brought me to my senses, and, as my body slackened, I was lifted up in strong arms, then half dragged, half carried from the cold, clutching water. Frightened and shivering, I began to sob uncontrollably.

Someone threw a blanket over my wet shoulders, and I caught a glimpse of Mitch's face, grim and white and questioning, as he held me against him, talking to me, making me listen. Only when I was calmer did he release his supporting grip, and I felt the dampness of the bank under me.

"Get Doc Brent over here," I heard him say quickly to someone. I sat there shaking and numbed into insensibility, my hands pressed against my cheeks. Vaguely I realized there was a small group gathered around me, their faces all registering shock. And someone—Florence—broke away from the huddled circle and made a quick movement toward something sprawled and bulky on the damp ground not far from my feet.

I shuddered involuntarily. Serena! Someone had lifted her from the water and placed her there. She was lying on her back, her head turned to one side, those soft, round arms stretched out away from her body, and the golden hair hanging in limp strands.

Mitch knelt beside her, and I turned away.

"Oh, no, not Serena," Florence was wailing in a tight, trembling voice, covering her thin face with equally thin hands. Paul reached out and drew her back wordlessly. She clung to him and hid her face in his jacket.

"What happened out there? Answer me! How did she drown?"

I looked up in surprise. Adrian was bent over me, his normally red, puffy face a white, hard mask of anger. His mouth was working nervously. Fiercely, he gripped my arm and stood glaring at me, breathing hard, his shirt open at the throat and his neck covered with beads of perspiration. He had a strange, accusing expression on his face. I sat there dazed and shocked. He couldn't be thinking . . . But I hadn't let her drown. She was already dead when I entered the pool and her body had suddenly released itself from its temporary anchor.

"Please," I managed in a choked whisper, trying to explain, but Adrian's fingers were cutting viciously into my arm and I cried out in surprise and pain.

"What happened out there?" he repeated, still working his mouth in that peculiar way. Then he seemed to sag a little.

"How did she drown?" He shook me roughly.

"She was dead. There—in the water. She . . ." I stopped, shaking violently. My throat felt tight and thick, and I rubbed it with one hand. I could still see Serena's limp, unprotesting body slipping from my fingers and floating silently in the water.

"Let her alone! Can't you see she's in no condition?"

Mitch was bending over me, and a frown flashed across his face. He glowered at Adrian, who still stood there angrily, breathing hard. Then Mitch pulled me firmly to my feet. My teeth chattered, and I began to sob.

"Mitch, I couldn't save her," I said wearily. "She was there—in the water. I saw her, floating."

"All right, don't talk. We'll get you out of here." He put a strong, supporting arm around me, and I

realized, puzzled, that we were walking away from the pool and the voices and that poor little heap on the ground. I glanced at Mitch, and his face suddenly became blurred. My eyes closed in protest. I was frightened and sick, and I trembled against him. I wanted to let myself sink into the gray mist of suddenly whirling trees and grass that had begun to toss dizzily. I wanted to succumb to it, let it envelop me.

"Mitch, I..."

Mitch was gruff with me, then.

"Don't faint, Ellen. Hang on."

But I couldn't, even when he shook me a little. The ground whirled faster in a mass of disoriented colors, and Mitch suddenly seemed far away. I felt my legs buckle, and I let them go.

He was carrying me, his arms warm and tight, supporting me against the slight swaying motion. Then there were lights so bright and hurting I had barely opened my eyes when I closed them again. I was still being carried, then put down gently, and I felt the softness of a mattress under me, a pillow under my head, and Mitch was saying, "Get her out of that wet bathing suit. I'll be back."

Still I didn't open my eyes. I remember thinking a little hysterically that it was getting to be a habit, my fainting and Mitch putting me to bed. Only it was different this time. Little Serena lay out there in the wet grass, still and lifeless, that lovely blonde hair wet and lank and plastered against her head so she looked like a plaster mannequin with a prominent red, jagged scar marring the white face.

I made a sort of sobbing sound, turned my head, and tried to rise, but Florence bent over me, pale and concerned. I could see she had been crying.

"Lie still, Ellen. It's all right."

She worked quickly, stripping off the bathing suit and putting me into flannel pajamas, in spite of the warmth, muttering something about, "Can't have you catching cold." She finished with an eiderdown and said gently, "Don't worry."

Then before I could protest further, she left the room. I tried to close my mind to the scene at the pool, but it lay clearly before me, that green gown so bright, mocking the lifelessness beneath it. I closed my eyes and felt tears squeezing under my lids.

I knew I awakened once, partially, and that when I tried to sit up someone pushed me back firmly and I didn't resist as dizziness struck me. I had a quick, hazy glimpse of someone frowning down at me—Mitch, I thought—then I closed my eyes again and remembered nothing more until morning.

CHAPTER XVII

"Hi, you look cute."

Mitch stood by the bed, his hands in his pockets. He looked tired, but he was smiling faintly.

Flushing in embarrassment, I pulled myself to a sitting position, my hair tousled and those terrible pajama tops flopping loosely around my shoulders. He sobered almost immediately, then suddenly leaned down and with a hand on either side of my face kissed me lightly. I closed my eyes and felt my pulse quicken.

"Do you feel up to seeing the sheriff?"

I nodded, looking up at those blue eyes studying me and feeling strangely exhilarated.

"He wants to question us about Serena's death," he said with a sigh. "Looks like she was dead before she entered the pool."

My heart pounded. "Then someone killed her . . ."

Mitch nodded. "And there has to be a connection between Phyllis's and Serena's deaths and the attempts on your life."

I shivered, seeing again Serena lying so still and white on that bank by the pool. A sob caught in my throat, and Mitch sat on the edge of the bed and put his arms, warm and tight, around me.

"Darling," he said huskily against my mouth, "I'm sorry you had to be involved in this. If there was any other way . . ."

I tried to smile. "I know," I said, my voice shaking, and I thought again, It is Mitch I love, not Paul—never Paul. Mitch was kind and gentle and warm, and I knew then that I had been in love with him since he

had kissed me that night when I had cried hysterically, wanting to leave Rutledge. And the way he was looking at me now . . .

I thought he was going to kiss me again, but releasing me slowly and glancing at his watch, he said, "Are you sure you're okay?"

I assured him I was, and he rose with a sigh.

"I'll tell the sheriff you're coming." He squeezed my hand, smiled warmly, and then he was gone.

Still thinking about Mitch and remembering the way his eyes had searched mine, the feel of his arms around me, I dressed reluctantly, knowing there was no way I could avoid going downstairs.

I found them waiting in the living room, and a chill passed through me, despite the warmth of the room, as soon as I entered. Suppressing a shiver, my eyes traveled quickly over Adrian and Florence on the couch, the latter's face pinched from recent crying; Paul's dark face lightened by a quick smile; and Gabby staring coldly at me. Carolyn was busily lighting a cigarette, her face unreadable. Then Mitch came up to me, smiled reassuringly, and led me to a chair.

For the first time I noticed Sheriff Wilbur leaning against the fireplace mantel and Deputy Thomas close by, his notebook ready and his colorless face interested. The sheriff cleared his throat.

"How long have you passed Serena Rutledge off as the cousin of your husband's niece and nephew, Mrs. Rutledge?"

The sheriff's words rang sharply in the stillness, and Florence turned white.

"What do you mean?" she asked huskily, suddenly alert, and her voice trembled. Adrian tensed and

leaned forward, and Paul and Gabby looked at the sheriff with startled expressions. My own pulse leaped with expectation.

The sheriff continued. "Isn't it a fact that she was actually your adopted daughter and the sister of Ellen and Phyllis Chandler?"

My sister? My heart pounded strangely, and I stared numbly at the sheriff. Adrian, holding an unlit cigar tightly in his fingers, sighed and put the cigar into the ashtray in front of him. The sheriff's voice jolted me to attention.

"She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Julian Chandler, isn't that right?"

Too stunned to move, I could only sit there and listen to the surprised gasps that filled the room. Serena was my mother and father's child! My sister and Phyllis's! I saw Adrian glance at Mitch.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Adrian. Everything has to be investigated. There was no other way." Mitch frowned. "It isn't going to make any difference now, anyway. Serena can't be hurt or confused by anything she might have found out."

My breath caught in my throat. Serena had been my sister, yet I had never seen her until she came to Rutledge that day as Carolyn and Paul's cousin. I tried to remember that arrival—little blonde Serena, age nine, standing in the hall and observing us with quiet shyness and serious eyes; tried to see, now, any resemblance to my mother or Phyllis or me. There was none. And I could hardly remember my father.

Florence again broke the silence, and I listened with rapt attention. Gabby and Carolyn appeared disinterested, but Paul was stiffly alert, his dark eyes riveted on Florence.

"Mitch is right," Florence said dully. "It won't matter to Serena, and I think Ellen has a right to know." She threw me a quick glance, then looked at the sheriff.

"Adrian and I adopted Serena when she was nine years old. Rebecca, Ellen's mother, came here with Ellen and Phyllis after her husband, Julian, died in a car crash. Rebecca had been driving. Miraculously, she escaped unharmed. When we brought her here as governess, she told Ellen and Phyllis simply that their father had 'gone away.' She blamed herself for Julian's death, even though we tried to convince her otherwise and tried to help her because of the bond between us of our long friendship. But she wouldn't listen. She became terribly disturbed, wandering through the halls, and we had to send the children to private boarding school.

"One morning Rebecca was gone, and she left a note pleading with us not to try to find her. We did try, of course, but she seemed to have just disappeared. Suddenly she was back, before the children had returned home. Still in the strange, confused state of mind, she told us that Serena had been born and put up for adoption. 'I don't want her,' she said. 'She would only be a constant reminder of my guilt at Julian's death.' She wouldn't tell us anything about the adoption. Soon after, without any warning, she became ill and died about a month later."

We had seen Mother become ill, knew she had died, but we had never known about Serena, until we saw, for the first time, the "little cousin."

Sheriff Wilbur cleared his throat. "Why did you decide to locate the girl and adopt her?"

Adrian drew on the cigar he had taken from the ashtray and lighted. "Mainly, to have someone to care for again. We had no children of our own, and wanted Serena to inherit the estate. Also, Florrie felt an obligation to Rebecca after what she had been through and to the child, who, we discovered, hadn't been adopted but was still in the orphanage where Rebecca had placed her. And she was, after all, the girls' sister."

Florence continued. "It was nine years before we finally located Serena, in an out-of-state orphanage. She was a beautiful child, blonde like her father had been, but highly sensitive and emotional. Adrian and I decided then not to divulge anything to her about her real parents; they were both dead anyway. We planned that some day, when she was old enough to understand, we would tell her we had adopted her and what the provisions were. At the time we thought it best to tell the others she was a little Rutledge cousin whose mother had died." Florence sighed. "That part of it, about her mother, I mean, was true anyway."

Adrian sat quietly, looking thinner and tired, the blustery manner gone. We had all listened in silence, and the sheriff smoked thoughtfully on the pipe he had taken out and filled methodically. I was still trying to digest the sudden revelation about Serena and the fact that she had been my sister. Carolyn sat stony faced; Paul was frowning, not looking at me; and Gabby watched Paul, her own face expressionless. They, too, seemed as surprised as I. Mitch, leaning against the mantel, smiled at me across the room. I felt the magnetism and took comfort in it.

"Then you three," the sheriff was saying, his

glance including Mitch, Florence, and Adrian, "were the only ones who knew about this?"

Adrian nodded. "Mitch, when he became the family lawyer, was told the truth for obvious reasons concerning the provisions of my will." He glanced at me. "Florrie didn't want you talking too much to Serena because we think that before the fire she had learned she was adopted and who her real parents were; how, we don't know, but she was terribly upset. After the fire she seemed to forget all about it; but we were afraid if you talked to her, questioned her about the fire, perhaps—even if you knew nothing about it—if you gained her confidence, she might remember what it was she had discovered. And if she had found out somehow what had happened to her parents, that her mother hadn't wanted her, in her disturbed emotional state since the fire it could have been harmful."

Mitch, too, had cautioned me, I remembered. My head spun. Had she found out from him? Only Adrian and Florence and Mitch knew....

The sheriff put down his pipe. "You said Serena was to inherit the estate."

"It's no secret now, sheriff," Adrian said. "Mitch knows the full contents of my will; it will be changed somewhat now with Serena's death." He sighed. "The bulk of the estate and the company was to go to Serena; Florrie agreed to this. Ellen and Phyllis were second beneficiaries. We always felt responsible for you girls, even though we didn't keep in touch as we should," Adrian said, looking at me and noting my surprise. "If one of the three should become incompetent, a trust fund would be set up for them. There was, of course, to be a substantial sum for my

niece and nephew and Mitch, who had been well provided for by their own parents."

"And in the event of their deaths?"

"Ellen and Phyllis's share—and Serena's, of course—would be divided among my niece and nephews."

"That makes an excellent motive for murder. Are you sure no one else knew about this?"

"Yes, unless someone got hold of the will."

"If someone else had learned the contents of the will, they might have decided to do something about it."

Paul or Carolyn or Mitch? With Phyllis and Serena and me dead, the will would be turned to their favor. I couldn't believe it was Mitch. He had kissed me and said he loved me....

That left only Paul and Carolyn. I felt suddenly tired.

"There's another thing," the sheriff continued, frowning. "Serena Rutledge died from a blow on the head before she was thrown into the pool, probably to silence her about Phyllis Chandler's death. Any one of you had the opportunity to do it; you were all here at the approximate time of her death."

Again silence, then the sheriff put his pipe away and moved from the fireplace, standing stalwartly in front of us. "I'm going to have to ask all of you to stay here."

Gabby pouted and tossed her head. Paul looked annoyed but said nothing, and his face looked white and strained, as if he hadn't yet recovered from the revelation of Adrian's will. And Carolyn. I wondered what she was thinking, but that hard mask with its dark eyes was impenetrable.

Adrian and Florence left the room quietly. Sheriff Wilbur motioned to the deputy and whispered something to Mitch, who nodded, then came quickly up to me. He frowned, put an arm around my waist, and said, "Get some rest; I'll be back."

Paul frowned darkly at me as Mitch left, and I avoided his eyes. After a moment he said loudly, "I certainly never expected any of this from Uncle Adrian." His voice was filled with disbelief.

"Well, with Phyllis and Serena dead . . . ," Gabby said flippantly, breaking off in midsentence.

Carolyn smiled cynically. "That's why you're going to marry Paul, isn't it, to get the money!"

"Carolyn, I never—"

"Stop it, both of you!" Paul rose angrily, and Gabby flushed and glanced at me.

Wordlessly I turned and left the room. Paul had followed me. He didn't try to touch me, there was no smile. He stood grim and tightlipped. "So little Serena was actually your sister, and now you're the only one left. I hate to be cruel, Ellen, with your sisters dead, but I don't think you're entitled to the estate. Are you planning to share it with Mitch? It is Mitch, isn't it?"

He spoke bitterly, and his dark eyes sparked angrily at me over the cigarette smoke. I didn't answer him. I met that angry gaze with an odd, sinking sensation. This was the other side of Paul, the selfishness, the arrogance clearly visible, the affection he had displayed gone. He seemed almost a stranger, and as I looked at him, oddly enough, I could see only Mitch's blond hair, his stockiness, not the arrogant, frowning, downcast face belonging to Paul. He wanted Rutledge. If I, too, were dead . . . I

shivered inwardly. Had Paul killed Phyllis and Serena? And had it been Paul who had tried to kill me?

Confused and tired, I backed away, muttering, "I'm sorry, Paul." Then I hurried quickly toward the stairs, my head still spinning. I had barely reached the landing when Adrian's voice, loud and shaking with anger, rose from the hall. I swung around.

"The manuscript. It's gone. Who took it? Where's Ellen?"

He saw me then and walked heavily toward me, his face angrily flushed. "Why didn't you keep the drawer locked? I left you strict orders." His face turned livid, and he began breathing heavily.

"I did lock it. Someone must have taken the key...." I heard the desperation in my voice.

Adrian sighed defeatedly and said in a slightly calmer voice, "All right, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to jump on you like that, but someone must have taken it." He passed a weary hand over his tired face. "All that work, months of research..."

I felt a wave of sympathy for him and also a tinge of anger when I thought of the tedious hours I had spent typing the manuscript.

"The will. It must have something to do with the will...." Adrian spoke as if to himself. He walked slowly toward the door, but I could see the anger in each step. Paul or Gabby—furious with Adrian for cutting Paul short in the will. Yet any one of them, after learning the contents of the will, could have stolen the key, gone to the study, and taken the manuscript from the drawer. I kept the key in my purse; someone could have known that.

One of them had to have the manuscript, and I felt

a sudden, almost desperate need to find it. I started my search in Paul's room, but it revealed nothing. Already discouraged, I moved on to the small guest room at the end of the hall, where Gabby stayed when she visited. I searched quickly but thoroughly, pausing frequently to listen for telltale footsteps on the stairs announcing Gabby's arrival. There was nothing, and I admitted to a wave of disappointment. Downhearted, I left and listened in the hall, then proceeded to Carolyn's room.

I wasn't surprised to find it plain to the point of ugliness and almost masculine in some respects. The usual drawers and shelves and closets revealed nothing, but as I walked across the room past the small fireplace I saw a few pieces of charred paper on the floor, about a foot from the fireplace. I stooped and picked them up, and they crumpled in my hand. Automatically my eyes traveled to the fireplace, and I saw the little pile of ashes and some more pieces of charred paper sticking out, clearly revealing that something had been recently burned there. I found myself on my knees, poking in the still-warm ashes.

There was no odor of anything burning, no smoke, and if I hadn't seen those bits of paper on the floor I never would have discovered the remains of the stolen manuscript. The fire must have been left unsupervised and burned itself out before all of the paper had been consumed, since several of the large, charred, brittle pieces I picked up had a legible word here and there. I recognized remnants of Adrian's detailed description of the colorful General Lee.

"Yes, I destroyed it. It was simple. I knew where you kept the key. He had to be punished. But you're not going to say anything about it, are you?"

My head jerked up, and startled, I swung around from my crouched position in front of the fireplace. Carolyn stood there, leaning back against the door, white faced, gaunt, a strange expression on her face. I heard the distinct click of the lock behind her.

"Carolyn, what . . . ?"

"It's really perfect. I didn't expect to find you here like this, and we're quite alone now. Everyone else is downstairs at the other end of the house. This is going to be simpler than I had planned."

"What are you talking about?" My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I rose shakily to my feet. Pressing myself against the side of the fireplace, I watched her in disbelief. She continued to stare at me, those dark eyes strangely empty. Then she smiled complacently.

"With Phyllis it was easy. Everyone was away except Serena. Phyllis had taken a cab from the bus station, and she said she was tired, that she wanted to rest a while on the balcony after she got settled in her room. It was so simple to push her over the railing." Suddenly she frowned. "But Serena had seen me do it, so I couldn't let her tell anyone, now, could I?"

My head spun giddily as Carolyn started toward me, one hand behind her and the same faint smile on her face.

"Carolyn, I . . ."

"You don't know what it's like to be pushed aside just because you're not the prettiest, just because you're only the niece and not the daughter. But Uncle was like the father I didn't have, and he and Aunt Florence ignored me for that quiet little mouse of a Serena and lavished all their attention on her just because they had adopted her. And then Uncle was

going to turn everything over to the three of you." Her voice hardened. "He had no right. I was the one who did all the work. I was here longer than any of you."

Trembling, I backed away.

Bitterness broke through Carolyn's voice as she came closer. The half-hidden arm rose from behind her stiffly erect body, and I saw the heavy brass candlestick she held in one hand. I gasped, backed away again, and found myself flat against the wall.

"Carolyn, don't!"

My breath choked in my throat as I struggled desperately with her sinewy strength, trying to grasp the arm that held the candlestick. Then I screamed as the arm lifted and the candlestick, with a flash of bright brass, came crashing toward me. Frantically I twisted to one side and felt the candlestick graze my head before it struck the wall with a loud thud.

I slumped slowly to my knees as the floor swirled in front of me in thick, gray waves.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Put it down, Carolyn!"

Someone's voice, stern, authoritative. I tried to get to my feet, but my knees were shaking and the floor still whirled dizzily. Dazed, I looked up and saw Carolyn slowly turn around and stare unseeing at Mitch as he came quietly toward her.

"Just take it easy, now. Stay right there. The sheriff's right behind me."

Carolyn went limp, and her fingers loosened their grip on the candlestick she still held as Mitch approached her. Then suddenly she raised her hand again, her fingers clenched tightly around the brass bottom, as Mitch grabbed her arm, and she cried out in pain. He pulled her toward him, her arm still twisted, and she dropped the candlestick as he forced her fingers free.

"Why didn't you let me do it? Why? It was only fair," she cried as he held her stiffly in front of him and pinned her arms at her sides.

Mitch glanced at Sheriff Wilbur, who had followed him into the room, and the sheriff moved quickly to Carolyn, pulled her gently away, and put her into a chair, where she sagged defeatedly.

Then Mitch was lifting me to my feet. I tried to hold back the sobs as he pulled me close against him, and I clung to him dizzily.

"It's all right, darling. You're all right. Go on, cry if you want to. You've earned it."

I didn't want to, but I couldn't help myself, and he held me like that, drew my tangled hair out of my eyes, and rocked me gently until the sobs finally

ceased. Then wordlessly he put me on the little couch next to the fireplace and sat with his arm around me. I watched Carolyn, limp and sullen, slumped in the chair.

Sheriff Wilbur stood in front of Carolyn. "Miss Rutledge, we found the missing part of that scrap of paper in the ravine some distance from the first piece, and it all fits together now. We looked for you downstairs, then thought you might be up here."

"But the door was locked," Carolyn said dully.

"I know. I had duplicate keys made to these upstairs rooms just as a precaution."

Carolyn was silent.

The sheriff drew out two scraps of paper, spread them on top of the mantel, and pieced them together with tape from Carolyn's desk. Then he brought the assembled pieces over to me.

> Please come to Rutledge at once. I want to warn you that something terrible is going on, and Ellen, I am afraid, is involved.
>
> Carolyn Rutledge

Carolyn sighed. "Phyllis must have torn up the note and dropped it in her purse, and the pieces fell out when I buried the purse in the dirt. I didn't notice them. I was in a hurry. I had put her in the car and driven as close to the ravine as I could, then dragged her along the path. I wanted to get back before Mitch got home."

"Is that how she lost the pin? When you put her in the car?"

"It must have been."

The sheriff pocketed the scrap of paper and walked back to Carolyn. "So you asked Phyllis Chandler to

come here, pretending that her sister was involved in something dangerous. Then you wrote to Ellen Chandler and asked her to come, with the story that Adrian Rutledge needed someone to help with his manuscript, which in actuality he did—a lucky bit of timing for you."

She had planned to kill me all along! "It doesn't matter now," she had said when she had asked me if I still loved Paul.

"Yes, I did all that," Carolyn said in a queer, self-complacent voice. "It just wasn't fair, you know, Uncle Adrian dividing up the estate like that and leaving me practically nothing." She glanced bitterly at me. "I hated all of you."

"You tried to kill Serena Rutledge in a fire five years ago, didn't you?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"Yes. I overheard Aunt Florence and Uncle Adrian talking about Serena and I found out they had adopted her, that she was Ellen's sister. I hated her. She got all the attention I should have had. Aunt Florence said she was going to put the birth records where they wouldn't be found. I didn't know what she did with them, but I told Serena what I had overheard and that the records were in the trunk in the playroom. She became very excited, said she didn't believe me, that her mother would never have given her up. I told her to look in the trunk. I knew it was locked and there was nothing there anyway, but I wanted to get her into the playroom."

"So that's why Serena was trying to open the trunk," Mitch said. "Florence had given the records to me for safekeeping. I never suspected that Serena had learned the truth."

Carolyn said, "Aunt Florence was right. And Paul suspected what I'd done and tried to blackmail me. But I had discovered his embezzlement of some company funds for his gambling debts and told him I wouldn't hesitate to tell Uncle Adrian if he mentioned anything about my connection with the fire."

Carolyn sighed, and her voice became dull.

"I found out just recently the provisions of Uncle's will. The estate should have been mine! I'm the one who slaved for the company! Serena didn't present a problem any longer after the fire, because I knew she would have only the trust fund. Phyllis and Ellen were the problems. I had to get rid of them so I would inherit the estate. But Serena had to see me kill Phyllis, and I was afraid she would start remembering things later and talk. I just couldn't take a chance. Then when she went into the woods and followed Ellen, I knew she was going to show her something."

I remembered the figure at the terrace window. It had been Carolyn.

"I followed, then hid in the woods, and after the ambulance left and Mitch and Ellen had gone, I found Serena hovering behind a clump of trees, frightened. I warned her not to say anything, then I went back to the house before I could be missed."

Carolyn paused and sighed again, slumping lower into the chair. "When Mitch brought her back and Dr. Brent gave her a sedative, I decided not to take a chance that she would ever remember, so I dragged her downstairs. I was going to put her in the pool, make it appear as if she'd drowned, but I didn't have a chance then. I saw Uncle leave the house, and he

would have seen me if I'd been by the pool. So I put her in the trunk of my car until I could safely get her into the pool after it was refilled."

"And she lost the green ribbon from her hair in the attempt to get her into the trunk."

Carolyn looked surprised, and the sheriff explained about Mitch's and my discovery of the ribbon on the garage floor.

"And you struck her on the head with part of the tire jack, isn't that right?"

Again Carolyn nodded in surprise, and her dark eyes widened.

"We found bloodstains on it, and we became suspicious when the ribbon was found near the back tire of your car. And Serena Rutledge had to be somewhere before she was dumped into the pool." He paused. "Is that why you didn't take your car, why you borrowed your brother's when you went into town?"

Carolyn answered impatiently, "Yes, I was afraid she might be discovered."

"Then you didn't lose your car keys."

"No. I had them all the time."

"We found a key to fit the trunk and opened it. Then we were pretty certain you had killed Serena Rutledge, that you had somehow found out about the will; but our suspicions concerning Phyllis Chandler weren't conclusive until we found the missing scrap of the note in the ravine. And as part of your plan you tried to kill Ellen Chandler."

Carolyn smiled grimly. "I thought her arrival was going to be doubly useful. First, the night she came, I pushed Serena in front of her car, but Ellen swerved

in time. I thought if Serena 'accidentally' was hit by a car it would solve one problem and would be considered just that—an accident."

I recalled Carolyn's maroon sports car had been parked in the garage when Mitch had driven my car in beside it. She had been at Rutledge all the time!

"Go on, Miss Rutledge."

"Later, I heard Ellen talking with Serena about the carriage room. I was just coming up the stairs, and I followed them. Ellen wasn't killed in the fall as I had hoped, so I threw the stiletto the next time."

"Where did you get it?"

"In the carriage room. It had been there for years, I guess. Afterward, as soon as I could slip away unnoticed, I took it out in the woods and buried it."

She sighed. "It all would have been so easy. When Phyllis came here and I killed her and hid her body in the ravine, I thought no one would ever find out. Then Ellen had to find that damn iris in the nightstand, and she knew Phyllis had been here. I remember now, Phyllis taking it off the night she came and putting it in the nightstand; she told me that variety of iris was very rare. After I killed her I forgot to retrieve it. Phyllis had given Serena one, too, so Ellen knew something had happened.

"I never had anything that mattered," Carolyn continued in a low voice. "Even Mitch ignored me—and I loved him." She didn't look at Mitch but stared stonily ahead, her thin, pale face lightly tinged with pink.

I saw Mitch glance at her sympathetically, and he said only, "I'm sorry, Carolyn."

Those glances, brief but meaningful, that she had

occasionally tossed him. I hadn't thought anything of it at the time. Perhaps I, too, was then already falling in love with him.

It didn't seem possible that she had done all of these things, the quiet, serious young Carolyn Rutledge I had known; but there she sat, still quiet and suddenly strangely relaxed, narrating in detail, with a peculiar tone of superiority, all the intricate workings of her mind that had resulted in two deaths and an attempted third. I shivered. She must have felt bitterness for a long time, hiding all the hurt behind a mask of reticence, and it had fermented there for years until it finally rose to the surface and exploded. I remembered how calmly Carolyn had supposedly searched for Serena upstairs after the girl had disappeared, when she knew all the time that Serena was in the trunk of her car.

"My bracelet," I said suddenly, "how did it get there with Phyllis?"

"I took it a long time ago, when you were still living here. After I buried Phyllis and realized Serena had seen me, I planted your bracelet there to throw suspicion on you. If they found the bracelet they would think it was you who had killed Phyllis, that Serena was just confused. You see,"—she smiled ruefully—"the fall down the stairs had only left you hurt a bit, and instead of trying again I left it to chance that you would be convicted of Phyllis's murder." She shurgged. "But then I decided I should finish what I started, so I took the stiletto . . ."

Her voice drifted off, and she sank back in her chair, closing her eyes.

"My God, Carolyn, how could you have done it?" Adrian had been standing in the doorway,

listening, and as he came slowly into the room he looked shrunken and sick with disbelief, his big, florid face pale now, and haggard. He was speechless as he watched the sheriff come up and touch Carolyn on the arm.

"All right, Miss Rutledge, we'll have to leave. I'll want you to make a statement in town." He helped her out of the chair and held on to her arm as she walked slowly beside him. In the doorway she paused, looked grimly at Mitch and me, and long and bitterly at Adrian, her eyes cold, penetrating, but she said nothing.

Adrian gestured helplessly. "Why, Carolyn? You could have had a job here as long as you wanted it. You were wealthy in your own right. I depended on you. I..." He stopped as he saw Carolyn's cold, silent stare, then he turned defeatedly and the sheriff closed the door behind them.

I walked to the window, Mitch beside me, frowning, and we waited until the little procession appeared in the yard, close to the sheriff's car. Florence ran to Carolyn, a bewildered expression on her face, and Sheriff Wilbur began talking to her. I saw her put a hesitant hand out to Carolyn, who shrugged her off rudely. Florence stood there alone until Adrian joined her.

Paul materialized from somewhere with Gabby close behind him, and I watched the sheriff put Carolyn into his car.

Poor Carolyn, I thought suddenly, feeling an odd sympathy in spite of what she had done. Then it all rushed back again. Phyllis dead, and little Serena...

"Mitch," I cried in sudden remorse. "Serena was my own sister...." I felt suddenly spent as tears stung

my eyes, and I shivered. "I didn't really know her, and now . . ."

Immediately Mitch's arms were around me as he roughly turned me from the window. "I know. I'm sorry it had to happen. But it's over now. Don't think about it."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "And Phyllis. Why didn't she tell me about the letter? Maybe then she wouldn't have come here, and . . ."

"Ellen, stop it," he said sternly. Then he took my face between his hands and kissed me gently. "I love you, young lady. Now, get your coat. I think we'd better have Doc Brent take a look at that bruise." His arms were around me again.

"I'm all right," I said meekly against him, not ever wanting to move.

"Get your coat anyway. We've got business to attend to in Wellington."

I raised my head slowly and looked up at him, surprised at the seriousness of his voice, but he was smiling and his blue eyes were watching me steadily.

"The dress shop," he said, still holding me to him, "among other things."

Said The Spider To The Fly

LOIS BARTH

Pretty, blonde Ellen Chandler, recovering from a broken romance, wanted only to live quietly, retreating from the outside world into her work in the dress shop she and her sister Phyllis owned and into her garden of prize-winning irises. But first there was Phyllis's abrupt departure on a mysterious journey and then the summons for Ellen to return to Rutledge manor.

Rutledge—the home of Adrian and Florence Rutledge, who had raised Ellen and Phyllis after they were orphaned. Rutledge, where she might again see Paul Rutledge, find that it was all a mistake, that he did love her after all.

But soon even the seeming calm of Rutledge was shattered for Ellen, as she began to suspect that Rutledge may have been the destination for which Phyllis had set out a month before. But then, why had no one seen her? Why had there been no word from her since? And what did the ethereal Serena know of Phyllis's fate?